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SLAVES OF THE RING;

OR,

BEFORE AND AFTER.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "WILDFLOWER,"

"UNDER THE SPELL,"

ETC., ETC.

"Le plus libre du monde est esclave à son tour."—**THEOPHILE.**

"Let none too hastily conclude that all goodness is lost, though it may for a time be clouded and overwhelmed."—**RAMBLER.**

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,

SUCCESSORS TO HENRY COLBURN,

13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1862.

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250. L. 21.



LONDON:
PRINTED BY R. BORN, GLOUCESTER STREET,
REGENT'S PARK.

BOOK IV.

[CONTINUED.]

After!

"A ring of a rush would tie as much love together as a gammon of gold."

GARETH.

"From trouble when I fastest flee,
Then find I most adversitie."

SIR DAVID LINDSAY.



SLAVES OF THE RING ;

OR,

BEFORE AND AFTER.

CHAPTER VI.

“ IN RISING TO RETURN THANKS.”

NICHOLAS THIRSK, in anticipating his wife's inheritance, had not spared money to give *éclât* to the festival. For a man whose capital was even sixty thousand pounds he had been in no small degree extravagant ; for he had rented a house, and started in life in a style more conformable to sixty thousand a-year. How much of his wife's supposed fortune he had forestalled, and what interest there was to pay on such forestalment, I did not know ; but,

judging by appearances, I could guess the amount was large, and wonder in what manner he thought of meeting it.

Sad and striking the exemplification of the old trite proverb—the cup to the lip, and the hand of Fate to dash it away. In a nature so ungovernable and wild as Thirsk's what would follow so cruel a disappointment? In our shallow judgment of what is good and best—the worldling's estimate of the wisely-hidden acts of Him who is above all worlds—the trials that are sent to us seem often ill-chosen and incomprehensible. Here was a nature, as I fancied, that could not bear trials; that took darker shadings in its hour of trouble, and rebelled and cursed a chastening hand; that only with fortune smiling on it was fair and equable. I could but shudder at the changes that would come to Thirsk, and to her who trusted in him for her happiness. And, God forgive me, I could but see in the result much of inevitable evil.

It was a strange contrast—the parade of wealth before me, and the actual poverty of him who had brought together these atoms of a world too high for him; the outward signs of all that could add to happiness—wealth and position—and the unspeakable hidden misery of that dark-faced man at the head of the table. Once when there was a burst of laughter—hearty and genial—at the sally of a witty guest, I saw Thirsk turn with a frown in the direction of the jesters, as though the laugh at his own ruin and presumption had suddenly rung out from the revellers. But it was a frown that passed away like magic, and he was the courteous, smiling host again, at ease with himself and his little fashionable world.

I could not keep my eyes from him; his was a character in which I had been always interested, and the singular attraction that had drawn me to him seemed to have ten-fold force that night. He was one trem-



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his guests. She read the change that had recently come over him accurately enough—and she feared it. More, she made an effort to learn it, and be prepared to resist a trouble, or to share one.

“You are evasive, Mr. Neider,” she said, reproachfully.

“Have I anything to evade?”

“I think so. I think,” she added, “that you two *have* quarrelled; that in his hasty and sharp way—which is not natural, and should not be construed too quickly—he has said something to offend you, and that you have retaliated with more warmth than he thought befitting the occasion. If——”

“My dear Mrs. Thirsk, I assure you that your husband and I are the best of friends.”

“You have told him some bad news, then. Ah! you colour!”

“Mr. Neider,” said a voice from the other end of the table, “let me have the pleasure of drinking wine with you. It was my

father's custom, and fashionable or not, I set the fashion here."

So I drank wine with Mr. Thirsk, who gave me a very peculiar look over the wine glass he held in his hand—significant of a hint not to concern myself with his affairs just at present. I think Mrs. Thirsk must have received a portion of that glance and taken it to herself, for she remained silent after her husband and I had exchanged civilities.

But she kept watchful, and the result of her observations did not tend to calm her. Taking wine became the fashion at that table, and more than one of the guests who challenged the hostess, must have noticed how suddenly white the heroine of the night had become. I took a careful survey round the table for the first time. Robin Genny and his wife had departed, Nicholas Thirsk's father was shovelling in pastry like a gourmand, and the wondering face of Ippe was peering through a half-

open door. Yes, it was strangely like dream-land—if Farmer Genny, or Grey, or even Peter Ricksworth, had peered from behind curtains, or taken up a position in the room, my surprise would not have been very great. In my stunned condition of mind, I could believe in anything remarkable—and in my fear of how the evening would end, I was prepared for anything extravagant.

There was a clattering of the silver forks, a buzz of voices demanding general attention, a long-moustached, big-whiskered dandy standing up half-way down the row of guests that faced me, and looking towards my end of the table. There was a talk about charging glasses—then a long unprofitable speech, which lasted till the guests were weary, and the wine was flat. I shall never forget that speech, or my sensations during its delivery, or the steady watch which Thirsk kept upon the speaker, glinting from beneath his contracted brows so scornfully.

If I could have stood up myself and given a war-whoop in the midst of the oration, I should have been most infinitely relieved.

The speaker, of course, proposed the health of Mrs. Thirsk—turned a happy period about coming of age, and made some vapid jesting about years of discretion, and some practical maundering as to crossing boundaries of life and stepping forth to the Beyond! He spoke with an overweening consciousness as to being the fit and proper person to represent the guests assembled there ; and with that ease and confidence significant of one of those common-place, twaddling, insufferable, supper-party bores, that we run against so often, and secretly anathematize so heartily. This man would *not* sit down ; he was vain of his eloquence, and of attracting general attention, and he persisted till the last in passing from grave to gay, from serious to severe, running the whole gamut of speech-making, and embracing every

style to evince his versatility. Had the man been a machine, turned by a handle behind, he could not have ground on more regularly and monotonously.

I have always entertained the idea that had this man simply proposed the health of Mrs. Thirsk, and sat down in a fair and proper manner, Thirsk's morbid fancies would have at least been restrained until the departure of the guests. His return to the company seemed in a degree to have restored him to his proper self, and afforded him some notion as to the respect due to those whom he had assembled there. But the speaker's oration darkened Thirsk's countenance more and more; and when he spoke of the esteem they all entertained for their fair hostess, of her merits, accomplishments, even, in the most execrable taste, of the fortune that awaited her from that day—for the story of the legacy was no secret—I saw Thirsk's hands fidgeting at his white neckcloth, as though it were a

trifle too tight to breathe in comfortably just then.

The speaker sat down amidst uproarious cheers, and there was a general rising to the feet and drinking of Mrs. Thirsk's health, with all the honours due to so important an occasion. Hip! hip! hurrah! and long life, happiness, health, and wealth to the blushing, agitated hostess at the end of the table!

Then there came a pause, a rustling into seats, and one figure left standing to reply to the mass of verbiage that had been recently delivered — a dark-faced, slim figure, that faced her whose virtues had been so loudly trumpeted. The eyes of all the guests were turned towards him, and he waited till one could have heard a pin drop before he began his speech, in tones cold, cutting, and unvarying.

"In rising to return thanks," he said, "for the great compliment which you have paid my wife, I feel somewhat at a loss as

to the necessary form wherewith to reply. If I accept all the speaker's praises for Mrs. Thirsk, I shall scarcely be acting justly to her or to myself ; if I endorse his opinion of our wealth, and of that happiness which the speaker knows so well wealth alone can bestow, by simply thanking him, I shall have misled all these dear and valued friends who have come hither to testify to their appreciation of our virtues."

All eyes were turned towards him ; the ladies did not seem to comprehend him, the gentlemen whose wits the wine had not bemuddled began to lean forward with faces of some gravity ; Agatha Thirsk sat clutching the table and staring as at a phantom ; my heart kept thumping under my waistcoat, with a force that aggravated me.

"I say *our* virtues," he continued, after a pause, and a glance towards his wife, "for Mr. Dewby has been pleased more than once to introduce me into his speech as the amiable and talented partner of that lady

whose health has been so generously drunk. And I talk about misleading you, because the morning papers will inform you of a little *contretemps*, which for me to conceal to-night would be hypocritical and ungracious. Hypocritical, for I cannot speak of the pleasure of seeing you, or of my belief in all your warm assurances, or of the happy day that this will be for Mrs. Thirsk to look back upon in the future years hidden from us both. Ungracious,—because I should deprive you of a sensation, and leave for a vulgar and ignoble press the first relation of that news in which I am sure you will be interested, which you will like to talk about and speculate concerning its ulterior result. The news has arrived, fortunately for you, unfortunately for me, at an hour somewhat late; but I have no wish to keep all these friends” (how bitterly he spoke the name of friend!) “longer in the dark than necessary. I beg, unaffectedly, again to express my doubts of all the blessings pro-

mised by the last speaker, and to inform you that the bank in which all our property is invested has come to an untimely SMASH! Had I not been as sure of your support as of your sympathy" (he looked a mocking devil then!) "I might have hesitated in this declaration; but I have a faith in man's professions, and am ready at any moment after this to entertain them as heartily as I thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for the honour and praise awarded to her who bears my name."

There was a momentary dead stillness, then blank amazement followed the return of Thirsk to his seat—and then confusion, dismay, and agitated whispers. In polite society the surface is ever so glossy, and the gaudy cockle-boats thereon are framed for such eternal fairness of the atmosphere, that this sudden rising of an opposing element threw everything into confusion. And in the midst of it Thirsk's voice rang out again :

"I hope, ladies and gentlemen, you will not let this trifle interfere with your amusement: the ball-room is quite deserted, and the musicians await your pleasure."

At the same moment Agatha Thirsk fainted, and one or two ladies screamed out and ran to her assistance; the guests rose and huddled their opera-cloaks round them, or shook themselves in their dress-coats, preserving ever the same bewildered air. Thirsk's father shuffled to his son's side and asked a few questions, which were lightly replied to, and baffled the inquirer. But the tide of fashion swept back from the ruined man, and the music that sounded in the ball-room was played to empty walls.

From the house the carriages were already rattling away—it was a ruin, and to be fled from, ere in the heat of the moment and the champagne, rash pledges should be made, that would be repented in the cool morning. One or two, inclined to leave

gracefully, went to Thirsk and shook hands, and expressed their regret at the news; and he bowed and smiled, and thanked them for their condolence, and looked straight over their heads at the opposite side of the room.

Suddenly there was Mercy Ricksworth in the room, and Mrs. Thirsk passing therefrom, leaning heavily upon her arm, the cotton print and the white silk in singular juxtaposition; and still the guests kept streaming rapidly away down stairs, and blocking up the entrance-hall, and the band was braying yet in the deserted ball-room.

Thirsk and I were left alone at last—even the father had stolen down-stairs with the rest, and left the host to his new world. Thirsk might have waited for the daylight, but he chose to unmask and step into it with an air of bravado; his sins be on his own head,—rank and fashion had done with him!

"A plagiarism on Timon of Athens, Neider."

"An eccentric step, at least."

"But Timon was left without one friend—and you—you don't go with the rest!"

"Do you expect me?"

"I have lost all faith to-night. Two hours ago I had faith in being a rich man—you see. *Stop that row!*" he shouted, with his old vehemence through the ball-room doors, and his voice rose over the harmony and quelled it.

"Can I assist you in any way to-morrow—be your messenger, accountant——"

"Creditor?" he added.

"To the extent of my poor abilities," I said.

"By God!—you're a good fellow!"

And he wrung my hand in his, till I winced again.

"But I'll have nothing to do with you!" he said, vehemently; "I've played my part, and you yours—and here on the verge of

the bright sphere from which I am slipping, I bid you farewell, like the rest! Come no more!"

"But I *shall* come, till I find you in a better mood."

"What is a better mood?"

"Looking at this misfortune in a different light; becoming more resigned to the change, and, pardon me, more hopeful in your efforts to make home and wife happy."

"Why the devil didn't your father make a parson of you?" he scoffed; "you waste your sweetness on a farming air."

Before I could reply, he cried —

"And what mean you by 'more resigned'? Haven't I been a philosopher to-night? — played the stoic, and the polite Diogenes, in the face of a loss that might have dismayed the foul fiend?"

"It's an odd sort of resignation — don't let us talk of it just now."

"Bid me good-bye, then!"

"Are you not anxious to see how Mrs. Thirsk is?"

"Time enough for the heiress! What's her loss to mine, do you think — her cares to her husband's?"

"You will offer her the best of examples presently, Thirsk. I wish I could leave you as confident in your powers to meet this storm, as so many men have met it before you."

"Braver and better men, of whom I know nothing!—good-bye!"

"Good night."

"Good-bye!" he reiterated; "I'd say 'for ever,' like a stage ranter, if I knew what it meant."

We shook hands and parted. As I went out of the room, I saw him drop into the seat whence he had risen to return thanks, and clutch his head between his hands, and make room for his elbows amidst the fragments of the feast, and think of the life that lay before him.

And I could but think of it too, and fear it, and pray that it might be brighter than I feared.

BOOK V.

Slaves of the King.

"Poverty, sweet husband,
Oft time hath been blamed,
But poverty with honesty
Never yet was shamed.
The rich man discontented
May be a poor man named."

ROXBURGH BALLAD.

"Albeit our thoughts
Be verily bitter as self-sacrifice,
We're no less selfish."

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

CHAPTER I.

TWO VISITORS.

NICHOLAS THIRSK was quick in his movements. After affording him opportunity to resolve into form his ideas for the future, and giving myself time to appear less like an intruder and more like a friend, I discovered that Thirsk had taken advantage of the interim to disappear from Bedford Square. I made every inquiry in the neighbourhood, but his future movements had been kept to himself, and the mystery of his whereabouts was beyond my power to penetrate. A sale had been called, all the costly furniture sold off, and

Nicholas Thirsk and family were far beyond my ken. Having taken no small trouble to elicit the fact that he was not arrested for debt—so far as my inquiries could extend—I set myself to study the newspaper, and glean from the account of the suspension of the Tramlingford Bank how much salvage from the wreck of a fair fortune might save my impetuous friend—in his difficulties then, I always considered him my friend—from present distress, supposing that not one helping hand was extended towards him.

It was a sad and a cruel story that of the Tramlingford Bank. The story that starts before us once or twice in the same number of years—as though there were some law of knavery, by which great knaves were governed. A breach of trust, the misappliance of capital, the temptation to grasp at heavy fees, and to speculate rashly in other people's money—the whole sordid spirit of self overruling conscience,

honour and God's laws, and winding up in discovery and shame.

There was a probability of a director or two being transported, and the capital of the bank producing something like two shillings in the pound—a matter of six thousand pounds in lieu of sixty thousand, falling to the share of Nicholas Thirsk. That his debts were at least equal to the former sum, I had no doubt concerning.

Some three or four months after the party at Bedford Square, the announcement that the bank would pay two shillings in the pound appeared in the public papers; and the day following such notice there came a visitor to our suburban farm.

“By George! who do you think is coming up the path?” cried Grey, who was looking from the farm-house window.

“I don't know. Who?”

“It's Genny—our old master, Neider,” cried Grey; “I thought he had forgotten the couple of us, long ago!”

My mother instantly began dusting and tidying, after the fashion of her sex. A sudden arrival was sure to throw her into a violent state of flurry; and Grey, having a number of affectionate brothers and sisters, was always the cause of considerable excitement to my mother.

"It's the only thing I don't like in Mr. Grey, my dear," said my mother in confidential moments; "he has such a very large number of relations. Poor dear, perhaps it isn't his fault, though."

In due course Mr. Genny was ushered into the parlour. From the window Mr. Genny, the farmer, had been seen to look over the hedge at the first field within his range of vision, and to stand with his hands behind him, critically inspecting it.

His first words on entering were—

"I maun say your grass-land looks well, at any rate."

"Weren't we young farmers brought up at a good school?"

"Ay!—though I say it myself—I think ye were."

And the old man shook hands with us very heartily, and looked gratified at the compliment which he returned, upon being introduced to my mother, by saying,

"Pleased to see ye, ma'am. Just such a mootherly, good-looking soul as I expected Mr. Neider's moother to be. Well, lads," turning to us, "and how's the new farm?"

"Pretty well, thank you; and how's the old shop at Follingay?" asked Grey.

"A new place that was too, and cost me a moite of money, and a bit of mortgage, which I was paying off by degrees, when the bank broke."

"Bank broke!—and you—" I began.

"And I was clean settled, my lads," concluded Genny, "as might have been expected, seeing I put my money there at two-and-a-half per cent., which wasn't covetous, and considering the low rate of interest, might ha' been expected to be safer than it

was. And so it be gone, and here I am again—oot on the world!”

Grey and I looked at each other in amazement. I had thought of Mr. Genny being likely to experience some loss by the bank breaking, but I had heard nothing from him in reply to a letter that I had written, and the surprise was great to me. And he looked so rosy and bright over his osses, and in his first estate had evinced so much love for the touch o’ the siller, that it was some moments before I could recover my astonishment.

“You didn’t answer my note?”

“Aren’t I answered it by cooming myself,” he said; “where’s a better answer than that, now?”

An indisputable fact, although his answer, taken in that sense, was two months old at least.

“I am very sorry—” I began, when he stopped me a second time.

“Ay! and so be I, though I doan’t

look quite so bad as I did. Not that I fretted," said Genny, with some dignity; "that ain't manlike and English. I think I swore a little, but it didn't do me any good, so I set to work clearing away the rubbish about me, and trying to get at my own proper position, which was a little bit foggy. Wull, it ended in my foinding the farm off my hands, my hands free of debt, and myself just owner of three hundred and seventy-five poonds, instead of three thousand odd!"

"Was it necessary to give up the farm?" I asked; "surely with time before you, and with a landlord who, I should think, was far from illiberal, the chances of retrieving your losses were certain?"

"Ay!—but I was getting old, and the farm's luck moight have taken a turn, and I should have had to borrow to begin loife upon, and ha' all the harass and trouble of my young days over again. Besides, you see, it's been a shock, and I doan't care

about saving and scraping any more—I was getting fast on to a miser, and I think perhaps all this ha' been for my good. I doan't fancy myself exactly the same man—I ain't down-hearted, not a bit, moind, but I ha' lost a little of my old pluck, and the soight of Follingay puts me out of sorts."

Genny had something on his mind, and we waited patiently for a clear statement.

"So you see, lads, I ha' put my mooney in the Bank of England; and now I'm looking out for a quiet sort of place, where I can make myself useful, and not be in anybody's way, and arn an honest fifteen shillings or a poond a week. If ye're in want of a man who knows a little of farming, I should loike to be your servant, for auld lang syne's sake—and if ye're full, I'll take a spell somewhere else. That's how it stands."

"It's a large farm, and of course such an overlooker as yourself would be a great assistance to us," said Grey at once; "but

we're young beginners, and can't reward you as your merits——"

"My merits ha' brought me doon to three hundred and seventy-five poonds," interrupted Mr. Genny; "we needn't cock our ears up much at merits just noo. I've told ye a' th' salary that will do for me, and not be robbing ye while I be hale and hearty. Be it a bargain?"

"We won't press you quite so hard as that, Mr. Genny," replied I.

"I've had many a good man for lower wages," said Genny; "and if living hereabouts be not too high, I shall be saving mooney on it!"

"We'll talk of salary another time," said Grey; "my partner and I will overhaul the cash account and make that square. By George! what a farm we shall make of this, with three such clever heads to work it."

"Ye take to farming now, sir," said Genny, turning round on me.

"Did I not take to it in the Welsdon days? "

"Pretty well, for one who didn't care much for farming, I fancy," said Genny; "at least Harriet fancied so, and she wor a quick girl to see into the dark corners of one. She told me money was tight-lacing me in, or soomthing of that sort, and we quarrelled about it. Ay, but it was true, I fancy now."

"Have you seen Mrs. Genny lately? "

"Yesterday."

"Indeed! She and her husband are well, I hope? "

"Ay."

There was a gloominess in his favourite adverb that chilled me, that even suggested a doubt.

"Isn't she well? "

"She says so—she ought to be the best judge. It poozles me."

"What puzzles you? "

He did not appear to admire my cross-

questioning ; he looked at me very steadily, as if to read on my face the object with which I inquired, and I strove to keep my colour down beneath his keen, grey eyes. I have said I did not love her then, that it was a guilty thought to think of love in connection with her—but I had not lost my interest—and I felt I never should. To hear that there was a doubt of her health — perhaps her happiness — was to startle me from apathy with an unaccountable force.

“I expect it be her husband that poozles me more than herself, after all,” said he, after a pause ; “he was always of the wild-goose sort, and I couldn’t see the end of such a match when it was made, or when it was finished, and you and I were left in the farm aloon. But we won t talk of it, Mr. Neider.”

So the subject was dismissed, and some time afterwards Mr. Genny took his departure. He, Grey, and I went over the

land together before he left us ; and it was like the old times to have him with us, and to hear the broad country accent once again.

Still the old times "with a difference," for he was never the old master. Positions had changed, and he was the faithful servant, whose energy in our cause, and whose respectful deference to our wishes, were somewhat painful to witness. In a very short time I could see that he was more unhappy concerning his niece than the loss of his money ; that, despite my former cross-questioning, remarks concerning her and her husband would at times escape him. And amidst it all I could see he doubted the niece's happiness and the nephew's power to promote it—and he was a man who, being naturally shrewd, was at least not naturally distrustful.

"I should like to run over with you some night, and see Robin Genny and—your niece," I suggested.

"I think I'd leave it for a while, sir," said Genny, with a peculiar intonation, that sufficed to check all pressing on the question. And what good could I do — and what right had I to pry into other people's troubles? Was it the foolish idea that I could do some little good—I believe it was, for I was vain enough of my good works.

At this period there came another visitor to the farm—a no less distinguished gentleman than the titled brother of Agatha Thirsk. He shook hands with me in his usual fishy manner, and said, in an aggrieved tone, as though it were a matter of offence, "I've had some difficulty to find you out."

"I was thinking of troubling you with a letter myself, Sir Richard."

"Concerning Mr. Thirsk?" he inquired.

"Concerning Mr. Thirsk's address, which I have been anxious to discover."

"I have found it again."

"Again?"

"He changed his address a second time,

and I should have lost sight of him had it not been for a friendly creditor—or rather a creditor whom I have managed to render friendly.”

“You have been very kind, I can see, Sir Richard,” I remarked.

“I wish to speak with you concerning him,” said he, looking askance at Mr. Grey.

“I have no secrets from Mr. Grey, Sir Richard,” said I.

“But Sir Richard has many secrets from me,” said Grey, rising with his usual good-tempered alacrity; “and if my absence can be of service to you, why, you’re very welcome to it.”

And Grey beat a retreat.

“Mr. Neider, you have been frank and courteous with one who is almost a stranger to you,” said the baronet; “I am beholden to you. I should like an opportunity to testify my respect, sir.”

Usually so calm and matter-of-fact, this observation was a surprise to me.

"Would you object to favour me with the result of that past conference with Mr. Thirsk, which prepared him for his disappointment?"

I told him, and he listened very attentively to my statement, and shook his head at the conclusion.

"A strange man! How can I expect to work with such crude and remarkable materials? How can I look forward to a reconciliation between that man and me? Mr. Neider, I think in my grave middle age I am becoming a castle-builder."

"It may do you good, Sir Richard?"

"Why?"

And he glanced very suspiciously at me through the glasses which he occasionally wore.

"You will pardon me, but I have heard—and you have confessed—that you have been a studious man all your life: absorbed in one particular study, that led you to neglect that greater study of home duties,

and home affections, which, sedulously cultivated, might have made your life so different."

I spoke out boldly, for I had long attributed Agatha's impulsiveness and wilfulness to his own neglect in the early days when a few kind words might have influenced her for good. I had no cause to spare him, and I thought that the utterance of my opinions on the matter, such as they were, might account to him for his sister's step, which he seemed, in the midst of much anxiety for her welfare, hardly to have forgiven yet.

He sat and reflected on the matter, keeping his eyes upon me all the while.

"We seem to forget our friends in our favourite pursuits. I think we only *seem* sometimes," he added; "but possibly you are right, and I am wrong. I thank you for speaking plainly; it tells me of an interest in my unfortunate sister, and you may aid me in a wish of mine, that I think

may prove me"—(he spoke with a little hauteur here)—"not entirely heartless."

"You misconstrue my words, Sir Richard."

"No matter. Will you excuse me if I return to the one subject that has brought me hither?"

"Certainly."

"You are a friend of Mr. Thirsk's, and he is a man who holds me at arm's length, and will have none of my peace-offerings. Still, I am not despairing, and for my sister's sake I will not resign my chance yet; for her boy's sake, I have no right to let any pride of mine stand between me and the duties to which, at last, I have awakened."

"You are not keeping to the subject, Sir Richard."

There was a galvanic twitch to his features, that implied a smile, and he went on again.

"I have faith in you as mediator, Mr.

Neider. Judging by your face, I should say you were an earnest, energetic man, capable of persuading Mr. Thirsk that I am not the evil genius of his life. An earnest, energetic man, at this period of his career, may save Thirsk from much recklessness."

"Is he reckless?" I inquired.

"I—I don't know—I have not been told so," he said, in some confusion; "but I fancy his disappointment is not likely to be met in a proper spirit. All I know is, that he is often from home, and that Agatha leads but a dull life in his absence—and that, that—even now it might all be so different!"

"Sir Richard, I will do my best."

"Thank you."

He offered me his fishy hand again, which I shook and returned to him. He seemed to consider it as a kind of agreement between us—almost to regard me as an amiable kind of spy, who might be of service to him in his future plans.

"Mr. Neider, I am a cautious man," he said, when he and I were standing at the farmhouse door; "I take a long while to make a friend—to put my trust in him. You do not feel aggrieved at any reticence in me?"

"No, Sir Richard."

"Candidly, I keep something back," he said; "but I am only waiting for a ray of sunshine."

Sir Richard Freemantle had long to wait.

CHAPTER II.

LIVING IN HOPE.

I HAD ascertained from Sir Richard Freemantle that Thirsk rented a small house in the neighbourhood of Marlborough Road, Chelsea. I had only required to know his address, to make one call at least in common sympathy, and I started the next day to play more my own part than the baronet's.

True, the baronet had startled me by his hints, but there *was* a secret fascination in Nicholas Thirsk himself, for which I could scarcely account. I felt that I should like to render him a service, or be the agent, however unworthy, to his better life.

I have said that I was conceited in a former chapter.

I was vain enough to deem myself, to some extent, a judge of character ; and in Thirsk's I had seen, or he had not failed to exhibit, some traits or flashes of a nobler nature than the baronet gave him credit for. In the past estate from which he had suddenly sunk, the nobler nature would have been developed, I fancied ; but in the trials that confronted him, it would have a fight to wage, and he was weak.

The friendship that I felt for William Grey was very different to that which I entertained for Nicholas Thirsk. For Grey I felt as for a dear brother, whose virtues were greater than my own, but whose great heart and steady life required no sympathy of mine, and were above it. In Grey's danger or distress I would have given up every moment of my time and done my best for him, as I am certain he

would have done his best for me. But in Thirsk there was evident the need of one true friend—the signs of how the absence of that one had set him drifting on his way, tossed hither and thither by a word, and turned ever from his course. From that course which might have led to better things!—for in contrast to the instability of purpose, where good motives were concerned, was the stern evidence of much cruel persistency in wrong!

Long ago Sir Richard Freemantle, a man who confessed he judged slowly, had seen the unfitness of Thirsk to be the husband of Agatha—and stung by the opposition, as much as prompted by his love, or tempted by her money, Thirsk had left no stone unturned to win her. And winning her, there seemed the old moral to such hasty matches once again developed.

“I am going to London for a day or two myself,” said Grey, when I mooted the question of calling on Thirsk; “I think we can-

not trust the farm into better hands than Genny's."

"No," said I, regarding him irresolutely.

"You look surprised," said Grey; "is there anything remarkable in my paying a visit to my father the silversmith, and seeing the few brothers and sisters left me there? In paying my respects to the new baby, etc., etc."

"No."

There was nothing surprising in that; but Grey had mentioned his project with a dash and a half stammer, and I was sufficiently acquainted with Grey's manner to know there was a little something in the background. However, he kept the secret to himself, and we went to London together—he to Gracechurch Street, and I to an hotel further west, where I intended to stay but a night or two, unless anything more remarkable than I bargained for should transpire in the interim.

I had some difficulty in discovering the re-

sidence of Nicholas Thirsk ; I had left it till the evening, imagining that it would be his most leisure time—and a dark starless evening amongst the little streets of Chelsea, in search of a certain number of a certain terrace, is an expedition of the Bower of Woodstock character. Still, thanks to a tribe of small boys who formed themselves into a volunteer escort, and bowled muddy hoops at my legs, and threw flip-flaps on all sides of me, I was before the house of Nicholas Thirsk at last.

It was a great fall, and my heart sank at its evidence. He had always spoken of genteel poverty as a curse, and I felt that to him, in the height of his triumph and his plans for the future, such a change must have done harm. A little one-storied house, indifferently clean in its exterior, with the iron railings in the front thereof paintless and rusty. The row of houses of which Thirsk's residence formed a part ended in no thoroughfare ; there was a pair of great

wooden gates, which formed by day the back entrance to some factory-yard at one end of the street, and at the other a series of posts, which boys were continually "overing" and falling from.

As I entered the street at seven in the evening with my escort, the place was resonant with boys whooping and yelling in every discordant key, and playing at no particular game that I could distinguish, save rendering each other's habiliments a trifle more ragged than they were. It is needless to say that I was the centre of a curious crowd on the instant.

"He's goin' after Miss Jones," suggested one; and "No, he ain't, he's come for orders," said another; and a third, possessed of a second-sight that was remarkable, pronounced that "I wanted the savage cove who cut after them with a whip"—who, I learned afterwards, was the Nicholas Thirsk I was in quest of.

A small untidy servant girl answered my

appeal; and to my inquiry "if Mr. Thirsk were at home," grinned from ear to ear in idiotic fashion.

"Is he at home?" I repeated, frowning down this familiarity.

"Lor', no, sir!—not yet."

"Mrs. Thirsk?" I said, interrogatively.

"Why, Lor', yes, sir!"

I sent in my card, and she left me standing in the street, with a whole legion of young imps becoming more personal every instant.

"Please to come in, sir," said the maid, returning. I entered, closed the door, as it seemed expected by the servant who had preceded me, and followed her into a room on the same floor at the back of the house. Mrs. Thirsk, with her baby in her arms, rose from a chair by the fire to meet me.

I tried to keep down a start at the wan, pinched face that met my own as I shook hands with her. It was all so great a con-

trast to the time when we had met last, when rank and fashion paid her homage, and she seemed in the midst of a dazzling world. It was a greater change, because it was so pitiable a face—the face of a weak woman, who had not been able to bear up against it all. Tenderly nurtured, carefully guarded as an exotic that a sharp wind might destroy, this was a rough transplanting.

“I am glad you have come at last,” she said, indicating a chair opposite her, and sinking into the one she had quitted; “I have been building on your coming.”

“I have had some difficulty to discover the address, Mrs. Thirsk. Yesterday, I learned it, for the first time, from your brother.”

She gave a startled look round, as though the word “brother” were treason, and might bring ruin on her house. Seeing that I had observed it, she said —

“We don’t speak of my brother here. If

—if—Mr. Thirsk should come in presently, pray don't mention his name. Mr. Neider."

"Still under ban and interdict, then?"

"For the present—but I have hope. I am living on hope now, sir."

It seemed spare diet, on which she had become thin, but I did not tell her so. I hastened to change the subject.

"If you think Mr. Thirsk is not likely to be home yet awhile, I will——"

"Pray don't go away, Mr. Neider," she entreated; "if he return, it will—it *may*," she corrected, "be only for a minute or two if you are not here to meet him. I am sure he will not be late, sir."

"May I ask if he has obtained any engagement?"

"Not a settled one yet. I am in hope," she said.

More hope, and speaking of it, too, with a face that grew more bright. Well, something to look forward to in the future, may lighten a present the reverse of satisfactory!

I could but observe how quickly her moods changed, and how one expression chased another upon a varying countenance. She was a weak woman, whom misfortune had shaken. An instant afterwards, and I saw the tears falling silently in the firelight.

"He will be more—more settled when he has obtained a permanent engagement," she said; "now, of course, he is hardly himself yet. My poor Nicholas has had a great deal to try him, as you are aware, Mr. Neider."

"I trust the first shock is over?"

"It will be soon; and I think there is a little difference in him this week. He was speaking of you to-day, and envying what he called your German stolidity."

"He gives me credit for more stolidity than I possess, Mrs. Thirsk."

"Once he told me—that was in the old grand days—that you were a man whom to have known earlier would have been of infi-

nite service. I wish you were his friend now, and saw him more often. I said as much that night the cruel news was brought to him. I say so now, with all my heart."


"You overrate my influence, Mrs. Thirsk," I said; "the influence to do good and mould his character is here already."

"Oh! my God, I wish it were!"

And the weak woman caught her child to her breast, and gave full vent to her impulsive heart.

"If I could save him by my own life's sacrifice!" she cried, with passionate vehemence; "if I had the power to make him happy, to keep him from wandering about the streets, to bring him to the home wherein I strive my best and do my utmost, and am ever failing! If I ——"

She checked herself on meeting my wondering gaze, and said, with less excitement—



"But I am a child at heart, sir, and let these silly thoughts carry me away at times. I was always a child, not over-strong, and perhaps not born for trouble. Will you forgive my folly, Mr. Neider?"

"My dear madam, there is nothing to forgive," I said, as she hastily dried her eyes; "this has been a great shock and a great change, and the days are early yet to learn the lesson of content."

"I would have learned it months ago—the next day after all our dreams had vanished—if he had not changed so much, so utterly. Sometimes I almost fancy he married me for my money—he mourns so much for its loss."

"Mourns?"

"I think he must mourn," she said; "he is so dark and grave, and says so little about the past—that is, until this week, Mr. Neider," said she, with that sudden brightening of countenance which had already struck me as peculiar; "and this week he

is less morbid, and comes home more early. Oh! dear, I hope nothing has happened to him to-night!"

I looked at my watch—it was half-past eight. Certainly not an hour for wives to become alarmed at their husband's absence.

"If Mr. Thirsk keep no later hours, I should not fancy there were any grave reasons for fear."

"No—but he promised me to be home at six this evening. There is some work waiting for him."

"Literary?" I inquired.

"Yes. I am certain," she added, sanguinely, "that it is in his own hands to become a famous writer, after all. But," with a little sigh, "it is in his own hands to make one or two true friends, and he turns his back upon them. His father he has offended again."

"Indeed!"

"There was a quarrel between them last

week, something about my brother," she said; "and Nicholas was very hasty—as he always is—and so it ended in the usual manner. I wonder," with another sigh, "what Nicholas would be without his little boy?"

The little boy had awakened by this time, and was sucking his thumb and looking intently at the fire. An open-faced, handsome child, of seven or eight months old, with two dark eyes like his father's.

"Sometimes I think that it is this dear baby of mine," said she, "that will bring him peace and love. He rails at him in his way, and affects to think little of him and the affection he evinces to him, and calls him a little outcast—and a Bohemian—and other frightful names—but I am sure he loves him. When he grows a big boy, I have such hope!"

For the third time that word, uttered so earnestly and yet affecting her so sensibly, as if its contrast with the present full of


shadows touched an acute nerve that made her wince. For ever lying beyond lay the fair hope that was to change all this, and which to think of was to keep her from despairing!

She was talking of her boy, when a dashing summons at the knocker brought the blushes and smiles to her face.

"It is Nicholas!" she cried; and with her baby in her arms she ran from the room to forestall the servant-maid, whom I could hear, in regions below, fighting her way through a crowd of domestic utensils, and kicking a few before her in her haste to reach the stairs. I heard the street door opened also, and a deep voice, very unlike Thirsk's, say, sharply,

"Why do you come to the door? Haven't I said fifty times that that drab downstairs is to open the door, Mrs. Thirsk?"

"But—but Nicholas, dear, there is a friend waiting for you."



"I have no friends!" was the hollow rejoinder.

The door closed, and Nicholas Thirsk, followed by his wife, came into the room. What a dark face it was, before it softened somewhat, as I rose and went towards him!

"What, Neider!" said he, shaking hands with me; "I thought I had bidden you good-bye for ever."

"I would not acknowledge it when you insisted, Thirsk."

"Well, you are a more welcome guest than I expected," said he; "I thought it was that fool Genny, when Agatha spoke of 'a friend.'"

"Is he a frequent visitor here?"

"He comes pottering here sometimes with his stupid plans for new magazines and serials that he hasn't capital to carry out, or energy to make them succeed if he had. Well, what's the news?"

He took off his great-coat and flung it across the room, nearly bringing down a

candle-lamp on a side-table by the manœuvre.

"Nothing particular."

"The world has not turned its broad back upon *you*."

"No—I can't complain."

"You're one of fortune's favourites, Neider," said he, taking a third seat immediately fronting the fire; "blessed is the man who has nothing to complain of! Hollo!"

This last exclamation was occasioned by the child setting up a scream, and making a series of struggles to pass from his mother's lap to his sire's.

"Quiet, baby dear, papa is busy," she said, with a wistful look towards Thirsk, as if to read the exact limits of his indulgence that evening.

"The brat should have been in bed, Agatha," he said, sternly; "I suppose you have been nursing him here, after the old silly fashion. I can't be worried!"

But the baby continued to cry, and

Thirsk to sit, with a hand on each knee, scowling at the fire.

“Never marry, Neider, without you can support a whole staff of nurse-maids and under-nurses, and keep the offsprings of affection in some quarters remote from your own. You will grow grey else, and be an old man, drivelling and idiotic, before your time.”

“And the mother?”

“Will degenerate into a fretful, peevish woman, whose love for her children will become a morbidity that fears evil to them, out of her sight. Come here, you young imp, then, if it must be. I shan’t hear my own voice else.”

He took the child in his arms, with more tenderness than his harsh words had seemed to warrant; and the little arms were flung round his neck, and the cries of sorrow softened into a few gasping sobs, and finally replaced by a crow or two of genuine delight.

"You have seen me in one or two characters, Neider," he said—"what do you think of this one?"

"A fair portrait by the fireside of home, and a fair answer to that last charge of yours."

"A humorous caricature, you mean, on social martyrdom."

"No, I don't."

"Then I won't attempt to convince you, for you were always an obstinate brute. Have the proofs come?" he said, turning to his wife.

"They were here at three, dear."

"Think of the pen becoming a means of support to Nicholas Thirsk," he said, turning to me; "I am beginning to discover what brains were given a man for. But it's hard work—cursed up-hill toil, for which the wages are fair perhaps, but the task and the taskmasters severe. And I'm not quite a man of letters yet, and I shall drop the profession before I put in a

claim to the name. Now, tell us of the farming. Shop for shop, Neider."

"The young wheat is looking well—that's the principal news. Genny is our over-looker, and that's partly the reason we're likely to make farming pay."

"Farmer Genny?" he said, with some surprise.

"Yes."

"What! has he come to the wall?—the knowing gentleman, who understood so well which side his bread was buttered?"

"He lost his money by the failure of the Tramlingford Bank."

Thirsk muttered an oath. He bore the mention of that gigantic swindle better in the early days following its disclosure than he did then. The reality was before him now, and he had tasted of its bitter fruits.

"When I was a boy, I remember a text-hand copy headed, '*Avoid Extravagance.*' I scribbled and blotted at it, and learned no

moral therefrom, or even the smash at Tramlingford might not have been quite such an uncomfortable drop. When my debts were paid, I was a beggar, Neider. And if it hadn't been for the charity of one creditor—a hard devil I had always thought him, too—I should have been in Whitecross Street or the Bench. He took a shilling in the pound, like a good Samaritan, and I have remembered him in my prayers ever since."

The boy had fallen asleep over his shoulder by this time, and he transferred him to the care of the mother, who went upstairs with him.

"Well—what do you think of her?" he said, when she had left us together.

"She is looking very ill."

Thirsk's nature was not a sensitive one, and I had no fears of greatly alarming him. Still he moved somewhat restlessly in his chair.

"Oh! she's always like that," he said,

carelessly—"next door to a child—excitable and frivolous—to weep at a rash word, or laugh at a jest pointless and insipid. You don't suppose," with a sneer, "that Agatha is any comfort to me in my distress?"

"If you are a comfort to her, Thirsk, it is sufficient."

"I haven't time to talk comfort," said he; "I have to mix in the world now, and keep my eyes open. I want a companion to help me, not a doll to help. She's happy enough in her way—the horrors make her happy sometimes!—and I didn't expect, when I married her, any great depth of thought, tact, or judgment. I told you what I married her for," he said, almost fiercely.

"You are not going to repeat it again in cold blood?"

"Well, no," he answered, "for she might hear, and that would be a trifle too hard on her, however true it may be. And now,

she is thinking of what a sober, comfortable couple we shall be soon, just because I am making the *amende honorable* for a savage fit of last week's!"

He laughed when he met my wondering look.

"I was always a savage at heart, you know, and now poverty brings into grand relief my cannibal propensities. Neider," he said, in a husky whisper, "there is such a thing as being possessed by a devil—and mine's a devil of discontent, that drives me mad at times. What do you think I feed it on?"

"I cannot say."

"Brandy."

"Who recommended you that accursed receipt, Thirsk?"

"No one recommended me," he replied; "I saw what a jolly good-tempered fellow it made of Robin Genny—how he forgot his privations, and the brokers that look him up once a quarter—and went away to a world

of his own creating, wherein he had a high opinion of himself and everybody else. I saw him the prince of happy mortals, when I was half smothered with rage and despair."

He seized the poker, and hammered away at the coals in his excitement.

"And brandy does a certain amount of good, if I take enough of it; and Agatha don't bring forth her brother's virtues when I come home," he said.

"You persist in looking at him in a false light, then?" I remarked, taking advantage of the introduction of his name.

"I don't care now whether he be a good or a bad man—in either case I hate him. If it sting him, as Agatha thinks it does, to refuse his offers of assistance,—to keep myself and her in this den, and wound his pride in that way—why, there's a comfort in my poverty, and I'll hug it to my breast, in preference to moving one step higher by his means. If he ever loved Agatha, and

is anxious to see her child, I will sting him all his life !”

He flung the poker into the grate again, where it fell with a noisy clamour, that awoke one of the subjects of his discourse at least.

“ I must have something to hate in this new mood of mine,” said he ; “ it’s only excitement that sustains me. I don’t care a groat what that excitement may consist of, so that it makes me forget. Do you know what kind of work I am writing now ?”

“ No.”

“ A smart story, *a là Crebillon fils*. A story that is sure to take, because it appeals to the passions, and hangs a wreath of roses over the doors of dark places, and has a fling at all the creeds under heaven !”

“ Good God, Thirsk ! — so bad as that ?”

“ I gave myself three days’ work once, by tearing up, in a fit of moral indignation,

two of the best chapters I had ever written. As though the prison for debt was not before me if I flinched—the respectable firm for which I write having advanced money on account.”

“Pay it off—let me——”

“Let *me* alone,” he interrupted; “men must live, and life’s worth nothing if one lament a downfall, or seek not a counter-irritant. That woman’s childish love and trust, upstairs, is so much more oil on the flames, knowing what a brute I am. Well for her that ignorance is bliss, and some scraps of her past hero-worship remain still.”

“Thirsk, I pray this is but an intermediate state of yours—I believe it is.”

“You are a stanch believer,” he said, ironically.

“I shall come here more often, to watch the change from bad to better—to offer, in my small way, a little help to bring you to a sense of what is right.”

"You know what is right then?"

"I think so. And, at least I can tell what is irreparably wrong."

"And you wish me a better man, with all your heart?"

"I do."

"Keep your wishes for one less tormented, then," he said; "I have passed over the brink, and there is no going back!"

"But there is."

"You don't know half—I shall never tell you half of what a villain I am," he said, letting his hand fall on my shoulder; "in one man's opinion let me be considered to have some germs of a good feeling, and let that man entertain a hope of me."

"You will not seek to avoid him, Thirsk?"

"He will avoid me some day."

His hand was on my shoulder still, and he was still looking in the fire, strange

and gloomy and despondent, when Mrs. Thirsk stole in again—and took her place by the side of him whose best days, she thought, were coming still.

CHAPTER III.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

THIRSK was as variable as the wind. He assumed his lightest vein after the appearance of his wife; assumed it so well that had it not been for that wife's previous words—which were still ringing in my ears—I should have been in doubt as to which was true, and which was false and extravagant in his demeanour.

“Bring out the wine, Agatha—shall our friend sit dry-lipped to the banquet? He has a hundred toasts to our future felicity to propose.”

And wine was presently forthcoming, and a small plateful of biscuits, a few of which Thirsk attempted and flung into the fire for being hard and tasting of the cedar-wood lining to the small cellaret wherein they had been deposited.

About ten o'clock I rose to go.

"Sit down, man—sit down," cried Thirsk; "this is an early hour for a bachelor to find his way home."

"You must have work to do, Thirsk."

"I don't put pen to paper to-night for fifty thousand publishers," he said.

"Still it is late—if you will excuse me," I persisted.

I was in no particular hurry to depart, but I fancied that he would settle down to work after I had gone, or else afford his wife a little of that attention which in the days before marriage had stolen her heart away. I was doomed to be disappointed, however, for he put on his great-coat, and seized his hat.

"You are not going out again, Nicholas?" pleaded his wife.

"My friend is ignorant of the London streets, and might be robbed and murdered, and never a one the wiser — perhaps kidnapped for the sake of his clothes, like an innocent *babby* as he is."

This jesting did not bring a smile to Agatha's face.

"I don't think I would go out again to-night."

"I tell you I am going a little way with Mr. Neider," he cried, angrily.

Agatha shrank back at his fierce words; she was well versed in his moods, and knew how far she could proceed in safety.

"Shall you be late, dear?"

"It depends upon circumstances — upon the distance to Mr. Neider's hotel, or the friends he and I may pick up by the way, or even upon the reckless driving of those 'cussed cabs,' as Tom Hood called them. Now, Neider."

"I wish you would leave me to my own resources, Thirsk !"

"You have not any. Come on !"

"Good night, Mr. Neider. You *will* call more often now, and see him," she added in a lower tone ; "he has been so different to-night."

So different ! This was one of his best moods then, and the young wife's heart had rejoiced at the change ! Thirsk and I went out together, and, until we had passed through the posts at the end of the street, the wife watched us from the open door — an action that again disturbed the little serenity of mind of which he had to boast.

"She's a laughing-stock to her neighbours, and would make a milksop of me !" said he. "If Sir Richard Freemantle, Baronet, could read the workings of our hearts, he might exult at the truth of some of his old prophecies."

"I cannot think he is of an exultant nature."

"You are very fond of defending him," he said, suspiciously; "have you seen him lately?"

"Yes," I said, boldly.

He muttered something, and then turned fiercely on me :—

"He may think that your knowledge of me may help to play his game—don't think so yourself, or we shall quarrel."

"I was not the first to mention his name."

"I have done," said he, passing his arm through mine; "and now, where is your hotel?"

"Near Exeter Hall."

"Pious quarters!—we have a long way to walk."

"I am rather tired, and think of having a Hansom."

"Happy youth, with cash enough in your pockets to indulge in such luxuries!" said he; "pity the sorrows of a poor friend, whose happy days are gone!"

It was the "poor friend," as he termed it,

that had suggested the Hansom cab—it would be saving time, and Thirsk would be sooner home again. A shallow expedient on my part, which, I think, he saw through.

When we were near Charing Cross he dashed his fist through the trap in the Hansom, and called out a few words, to which the cabman answered,

“All right, sir!”

“What plot is hatching now, Thirsk?”

“It’s only a whim of mine. You were literary inclined once, you told me—come and see the waifs and strays of the literary world. Not the respectable portion of the community—the house-renters, tax-payers and great guns—but the hard-worked, nigger-driven third and fourth-raters, the jolly good fellows who spend more money than they earn, and are up to a thing or two.”

“Not to-night, Thirsk.”

“The virtuous youth sees the broad path before him that leads to destruction,” cried

Thirsk, "and fancies me Mephistopheles at his elbow! And I take him into society of which any man might be proud."

The cab swung round by the Lyceum Theatre, and rattled through a maze of streets near Drury Lane. Presently the cabman was dismissed, and we were entering a spacious supper-room, where several gentlemen were amusing themselves in drinking and smoking, in much the same manner as ordinary mortals.

"A bad night," said Thirsk, looking round, "only the editor of a penny journal, and a few dramatic scribes, whose company is not worth much, and, yes — Robin Genny, at least, and as bemuddled as usual."

"Genny!"

"Oh! he's always here now! I fancy he don't get much work, and has taken to produce a very second-rate article for the money. His brains are spinning rapidly away, and there remains no name to trade in after the brains are gone. He's turning

a visionary, and is full of ideas that are worth nothing. They say he earns money still; but then there's an elbow-shaking establishment round the corner which he patronizes."

"I am sorry to hear that."

"For his sake, or his wife's?"

I coloured at the abrupt question, and the strange look in his eyes.

"For both." I answered; "do you blame me?" •

"I!" he exclaimed; "did I ever blame a human being in my life? Your sentiments do you honour, as prosy people say. Hi, Genny!—leave the Circean cup, and come hither!"

"What the deuce do you know about the Circean cup, young jackanapes?" cried Genny, advancing with a vacillating step towards us; "you're in full feather to-night, Thirsk. How is the world to account for this marvellous good temper?"

"Am I not always the best of good company?"

"In your own opinion—nobody else's."

"Here's Alf Neider, who should have been one of our set, and took to farming and farm stock," cried Thirsk; "you don't mean to say you are too drunk to know him?"

"I was never more sober in my life," said Genny; and there was a shout of laughter from half a dozen inmates of the room.

"Laugh away, gentlemen—I suppose I may have an opinion of my own on the matter?" said he, "and I won't quarrel with you on the subject. I never quarrell!"

"A first-rate fellow," echoed a voice from the corner; "he's going to stand glasses round, in honour of his last success."

"I wouldn't mind that, if I had really been in luck's way," said he; and then, turning to me, he added, "and you're Nei—Neider? Not a bad sort, was he, Thirsk?"

"Would I have brought him here, if he had been? He's——"

"I know all about him," interrupted Genny, "he's one of my best friends. You needn't play the showman to me. My dear Neider, I'm devilish glad to see you!"

And he began to shake my hand with a pertinacity that became rather monotonous. I inquired concerning the health of Mrs. Genny, and was informed that she was the very picture of health, God bless her!—and as happy as the day was long; and then the hand-shaking began anew, till, watching my opportunity, I managed to escape his grasp.

"I saw the old farmer a day or two ago, Neider," said he; "he has come down hill as well as the rest of us. What a race it has been to the bottom—and didn't our black-faced friend take it good-humouredly?"

And he dug his fingers into Thirsk's side, and was rewarded with a volley of abuse for his pains.

"Genny, you're too drunk to be rational, just at present," concluded Thirsk; "we

have arrived here too late in the evening, I see!"

"Upon my soul, I am not drunk," said Genny, solemnly, "it's only the excitement of meeting an old friend like Neider. A sweetheart of my wife's once—the sly dog!"

"You needn't blare that story out now," said Thirsk, with more consideration than I could have naturally expected; "we know all about it."

"Thirsk, I have an idea for a new half-penny magazine."

"Keep your ideas, Genny—I have no time to consider them."

"Let us have a song—and a few dozen oysters, with cayenne vinegar, and three glasses of stout, or brandy and water. Waiter!"

"Excuse me, Genny, but I am paymaster to-night."

"Of course you are—who denies it?" said Genny, at which there was a general laugh at my expense.

"My treating days are over," said he, in a lachrymose vein; "somehow or other things aren't quite so square as they used to be. When I had a shilling to spend, I shared it with my co-mates and brothers in ink, and it's infernally seldom that they imitate so fair an example. Let us have supper. I promised Harriet to be at home—at home at—what the devil time now did I promise Harriet to be at home?"

All this is a pitiable picture, which I am anxious to curtail—which I would not have introduced here, had it not led to other events. It was painful to see how greatly he had altered in a little time, or seeing him under different auspices, feel how much he had disguised. It was the wreck of a clever man, always as sad a ruin as human life can exhibit. A man with half his talent, and twice his perseverance, might have risen higher in the scale. I do not set him here as a fair type of a literary man; to a hundred who are hard-working and earnest,

there is one like unto him perhaps. A man whose excuse for much weakness is reaction and desire of change, and who will let the best chances of life go by and make no effort. One who made money quickly, and was infected with a disease not wholly uncommon to literary men—that of spending it more rapidly, without a thought for the morrow, or a dream of a day when the hand, the sight, or the brain might suddenly fail. Summed up in a few words, a man who had not a will of his own. There are such men in all professions, and they are ever to be found late in life at the bottom of the hill.

I pass over the supper, the company that increased as the hours grew late, and the talk of books, plays and actresses that followed. They were all third-rate professionals of literature and the stage, and envious of those who had succeeded in the world better than themselves.

Throughout the evening I did not hear

one good word spoken of those whose names were household words; they talked a great deal of the merits of present company, and of the vices of all the leading men and women of the time, and I felt that they were no true representatives even of that literary world for which they had not even one good word. It was a mixture of poor reporters, writers of bad farces, contributors to the lowest class magazines, supernumeraries of west-end theatres who were "kept down" by cruel managers and spiteful first comedians. From such a world I was glad to be quit, and find myself in the cool streets again. Genny and Thirsk were with me—Thirsk irritable and moody, as though society had soured him; Genny more good-tempered and easy than ever, but so unsteady on his legs that he slipped as he emerged from the supper room, and clung to my arm tenaciously.

"Time they had a new step here," said Genny; "that's the second time I've stumbled this week."

"Good night to you," said Thirsk.

"I shall give you a look in next week, Thirsk," said he; "I've another idea for a six-penny journal, that I think we might push into the market between us."

"Good night," returned Thirsk; "are you coming, Neider?"

"Coming!" echoed Genny; "no, sir, he's coming with me, to pay his respects to Mrs. Genny, and enjoy an after-supper pipe by the fireside. Do you think I am always from home, like you?"

"Oh! you are the model husband," sneered Thirsk; "now, Neider, which way is it to be?"

"I think it is too late to call on Mrs. Genny to-night."

"She always sits up for me—it's all right."

But I declined his offer, and, after bidding him good night, Thirsk and I left him to proceed on his way alone. At the corner of the street we stopped to look after him.

He was plodding on unsteadily, and as we watched he gave a sudden lurch, that took him into the roadway, where he continued to walk unconsciously.

"He's abominably drunk," commented Thirsk; "if he be not run over presently, it's no fault of his own."

"Does he live far from here?"

"Somewhere in Gray's Inn Road—down a back slum that corresponds with my locality."

"I think I'll see him as far as his own door."

"Ah!—ha!"

"What do you mean by that, Thirsk?"

"Nothing—nothing," he said; "I am a scoffer, and see no good in my own species. I come of a bad stock, and there's evil ingrained in me. You'll be doing a good turn to Robin Genny—good night."

"Good night, Thirsk—I shall see you shortly."

"I hope so."

He walked on in the direction of home, and I followed Robin Genny. I had a fear that he would meet with some accident before his return home, and I went after him, as I would have gone after Nicholas Thirsk, had he needed my services. And yet amidst my best intentions there lurked the selfish wish to see Harriet Genny once more. I could but wonder how she bore her troubles, and if there were as many shadows in her home as in the house at Chelsea I had quitted that night.

CHAPTER IV.

BONDAGE.

I HAD soon overtaken Robin Genny, and drawn him from the roadway to the narrow pavement. When I first touched his arm, he muttered without turning round,

“All right—at whose suit?”

“Alfred Neider’s, Esquire, late of Follingay Farm.”

He looked up and laughed.

“I thought it was all—all up with me,” said he; “they’ve been threatening so long, that it came quite natural. So you’ve repented?”

“Partly,” was the reply; “I am

going your way, if you'll allow me."

"By all means!—I was always fond of company."

He plodded on in silence for some time. Suddenly he exclaimed —

"How Harriet will stare to see you!"

"I—I am not quite certain that I shall look in to-night."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow — you're one of the old stock. Harriet don't," with a feeble laugh, "take very much to the new. She talks sometimes of their leading me away, as if I were ever talked over, or *done* in my life!"

"You are at home a great deal, of course?"

"Every moment I have to spare, my dear Neider," said he, with a hiccup; "for she's a girl who makes home very comfortable and jolly. And she don't preach to me—I hate preaching. And when I'm ill she makes such a capital nurse!"

"Ill!"

"I have swimmings in my head, and all

manner of funny complaints—I can't think what causes them."

"You don't drink much, I suppose?" I suggested; "that's a bad habit, which brings on a train of disasters."

"Oh, no! I never drink," said he, "I can't write if I drink. Which is the Gray's Inn Road now?"

"I think this is it. Shall I ask?"

"I've no objection, though it seems rather foolish for me not to know the Gray's Inn Ro-o-ad. Steady, Neider, you have a horribly ungraceful walk of your own!"

I did not argue the matter with him as to whose walk might be considered the more ungraceful of the two—he was past argument. I inquired for the Gray's Inn Road, and found we were progressing correctly. Indeed, with a true drunkard's instinct, he led the way direct to his home—more dark and dull a home, standing in a more neglected street than I had found his brother author's dwelling-place.

It was striking two, from some neighbouring church-clock, when the door opened to our summons.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear, it's not one of the new set. It's Alfred Neider, of — of ours."

"Come in! — come in! There is no occasion to talk so loud at this hour," I heard Harriet's voice exclaim; "the lodgers will hear you, and complain in the morning, Robin."

"I forgot the lodgers!"

She led the way into the front room—a sparely furnished room, lighted by one glimmering candle. There were two female occupants of the room then—Harriet Genny, and her cousin Mercy Ricksworth; the former with a shawl huddled over her shoulders for warmth, the latter dressed for walking. I scarcely remembered shaking hands with both of them a moment afterwards, so amazed was I at the change that a few months had made in Harriet Genny.

Was it Harriet Genny?—or some ghost of her, no more real and substantial than her shadow thrown upon the wall by the flickering candle-light!

Those hollow eyes, that wan face, the high cheek-bones, were all new to me; and could the smile with which she welcomed Robin Genny back have so long masked the care at her heart, as to deceive even him?

"You have been ill, Mrs. Genny!" I ejaculated.

"I am quite well. I haven't time for any fine ailments," she replied; "pray sit down, Mr. Neider. You are a late guest, but a welcome one."

"I am glad to hear you are quite well," I could but respond; then I leaned back in the chair, and looked round stupefied.

"Now, Harriet, dear—what can we give Mr. Neider, in the shape of something more substantial than words? Mercy, do you mind running round——"

"I shall not stop a minute, Genny," I said, quickly; "I have only to bid you good night, and hope that you will allow me to call to-morrow, or next day, at an hour more seasonable."

"Can't we knock him up a bed somewhere, Harriet?"

"I fear not," was the dry response.

"Oh! I forgot those confounded lodgers!" said Genny; "don't you think old Mason next door might manage to shake him down somewhere?"

"My bed is already engaged at an hotel, Genny," I remarked.

"Will you come up stairs with me for a moment, Robin," said his wife.

"What for?"

"I have something to tell you—will you come?"

"Not just yet, my dear."

But Harriet put her hand upon his arm, and said something in a lower tone—in much such a tone as a mother would address

a froward child—and Genny followed her from the room.

Mercy Ricksworth turned to me almost before the door had closed :—

“He has met Mr. Thirsk again?” she cried.

“Mr. Thirsk was not with him till a late hour, Miss Ricksworth.”

“And he was — he was like that then?”

“Yes.”

“Poor Robin! — ever his own enemy! He should have been my father’s son!” she added bitterly.

“May I ask if you are staying in London?” I inquired, making an effort to dismiss a painful topic.

“My mother keeps a little shop in this neighbourhood. Since I have left the Thirsk’s, I assist her as well as I can.”

“We all have given up Welsdon in the Woods, then?”

“Yes,” she said; “we were all ambitious,

and tired of a country life. How we have changed !”

“Change is natural to us, I suppose.”

“But they have been such unnatural changes,” she cried, impetuously; “the result of such unnatural marriages. And I was a fool, who helped her I loved—I worshipped—to her misery !”

“Misery is a hard term.”

“It is a—” she stopped, as Harriet came back into the room, and looked almost sternly from me to her.

“On whose misery are you commenting—you two?”

“We were speaking of Mr. Thirsk and his wife, Mrs. Genny.”

“Have you seen them lately?”

“To-night.”

“They occupy their relative positions, I presume—the selfish man, the poor weak woman whom a word can sway.”

“She is weak, and he is reckless and excitable, at least.”

"An unhappy, ill-assorted match," she said, as though her own marriage had been the best in the world; "what else could have been hoped from it."

"I hoped much more!" cried Mercy, almost indignantly.

"You were a foolish, romantic girl, and as impulsive as your mistress."

"Please don't say anything against her," cried Mercy, with still more vehemence; "if you will not help her as I wish, don't slander her."

"Mercy!"

"Forgive me, Harriet, but I am hasty—I was always hasty. And you know how much I love her. I have been with her all my life, off and on, even from the time when we were little children together, and I cannot bear to hear a word against her. Wouldn't I die to serve her?—*you* know!"

"You will never serve her if you are always flashing up like this, Mercy."

“I will try.”

Harriet did not reply to the sullen response ; she understood Mercy, and Mercy's love for Mrs. Thirsk, and said no more. I was standing at the parlour door, looking at them both—both so poorly clad, both such mistaken women! I had been shocked by the evidence of poverty, by the struggle against adverse circumstances, which everything before me indicated. And she was strong amidst it all—I saw it still—I knew it. God be thanked she did not resemble Agatha Thirsk !

“It is too late, Mr. Neider, for us to seek to detain you—you will excuse my husband coming down again, I am sure.”

I was very glad to excuse him, though I simply agreed with her that the hour was late.

“He has fallen amongst a few convivial friends to-night,” said she, with a faint smile, “and he will have to work with two-fold energy to-morrow, to make up for the

time he has lost. Where did you meet him?"

I told her.

"Ah!—he *is* there once or twice a year. Of course, I cannot expect him always at home. You, Mr. Neider, must not judge him by so exceptional a night as this. He is very—steady—generally."

The words came slowly forth. Poor, vain white lies, which were an effort to make, and deceived no one.

"If we are not quite so well off as we might be," said she, as though she had previously remarked my wandering glance round the poorly-furnished room; "we may rise in life at any moment—Robin being so clever and industrious. One lucky hit in his profession, Mr. Neider, is a rise to greatness on the instant."

"Yes—possibly."

"And he is a sanguine man. We are both a little too sanguine, perhaps, but it is a good trait of character, though it has led

us to launch out a little beyond our means—and the means has not come yet. Still, if he makes me the best, the kindest, the most considerate of husbands, this little home is happy enough for me.”

She spoke warmly, almost defiantly, and I could but assent to all she said. If I saw that it was acting, and but poor acting, it was not my place to say I doubted everything, and believed in nothing but her own hard fate. Standing ever a screen to her husband's faults, and taking a share of them undeservedly, my heart sank, yet thrilled, at her heroism. She was the true wife that I knew she would be. His weakness would not steal away her love, but be part of her own—to be ever fought against and extenuated, from the day their lives were linked together. She might wake to the knowledge of having been self-deceived, in hoping too much from the future, but she would accuse but herself for the grave mistake that had marred it.

"You spoke of coming to-morrow, Mr. Neider," said she; "it may seem ungracious, but I have to ask you to defer your visit."

"Mrs. Genny has only to ask."

"He *must* work to-morrow, and every minute stolen from his time distracts his mind from the task upon which he is engaged. You see this, Mr. Neider "

"Perfectly," I answered; "I must take my chance on some future day of finding him less busy. Unless Mr. Genny and you will forestall me by a visit to my new farm."

"We never pay visits."

"But I am an old friend, and I think the change would be so beneficial to you both."

"No," she said, in her old abrupt manner—the first sign of the old petulance that she had yet exhibited.

"It is late, Mrs. Genny, and we will not argue the matter at present. It is not the

last time that I shall make Mr. Genny and you the offer."

"You are very kind," she murmured; "but it is impossible for us to think of it. Are you going now?"

"Have I not already detained you too long?"

"Late hours agree with me very well," said she. "Mercy, dear," to her cousin, "I think you had better stay to-night—it is very late."

"No, thank you," was the firm response.

"Then I shall place you under Mr. Neider's escort. It is too late for a young woman to be alone in the streets, however short the distance may be to her home. And I am sure Mr. Neider will oblige us both so far."

"I shall be very happy."

Mercy's dark eyes seemed full of an uncomplimentary rejoinder. I should not have been surprised at her flat refusal to allow me to accompany her one step of the way. She said nothing, however, but fol-

lowed Harriet and me into the passage. Harriet opened the door, and said "Good night, Mercy," offering to kiss her; Mercy drew back. There had evidently been a little quarrel previous to my arrival.

"Very well," said Harriet, in a low tone; "if you will take offence because I have no heart to obey your foolish behests, you must."

"You could do so much—and you won't!"

"Let me change places with her for a moment—would you have pressed her to see me?"

"Yes," was the quick answer.

"I can do no good—I have my own duties to fulfil."

"She is so weak—she has been brought up so differently, and I—I know so little of what is best myself."

"What is it you want?"

"I wish you to talk with her—you can! She frets and does not bear up well, and

you—you are a woman of such courage!”

“Would not you take me for an amazon, Mr. Neider, or, at least, a person of very great importance, to hear my cousin speak thus?”

“Pardon me intruding on your particular topic of conversation, but I think you allude to Mrs. Thirsk?” I said.

“Yes,” answered Mercy, eagerly.

“Miss Mercy is in the right, then; you could be of service to Mrs. Thirsk.”

“She is in trouble,” murmured Mercy.

“Haven’t I my own——duties?” she added, after a pause; “have I been so much Mrs. Thirsk’s friend, that I can be warranted in intruding upon her?”

“You would both be the better for it, for you are both——”

“Go, now, Mercy—please go! I am tired of your persistence—I succumb to it. I will call and see her.”

Mercy flung her arms round her, and kissed her on the instant; after which im-

petuous salutation, I shook hands with Mrs. Genny. What a feverish hand it was to hold a minute in my own !

“ Will you forgive me saying that a sanguine nature—such as yours and your husband’s—is liable to much disappointment; that I hope—that in any little temporary check which may embarrass you—you will both think of me as an old friend.”

At the sight of her home and her appearance therein, I had made up my mind to say something to that effect. I had seen too surely the signs of a desperate fight, to shrink from saying it. In as indirect a manner I implied as much, and chanced offending her.

The light she held in her hand betrayed the varying colour on her cheek—albeit without it, the voice, cold, icy, and repelling, would have deceived me.

“ In my husband’s name, I will thank you for your interest in us, though I hope

he and I will ever be able to assist ourselves.
Good night, sir."

"Good night."

And so we parted, and the firm woman shut the door between us, somewhat suddenly. I did not hear her go back to her room—I fancied even that I heard a wild, stifled sob; but I was full of fancies that night!

"I think she is jealous of my love for Agatha," said Mercy to me, when we were in the street; "as if I could help loving Agatha Thirsk better than herself! Agatha, who has been always kind to me, and always forgotten the distance between us!"

"You love your cousin too?"

"Ever since that night you and she came to my father's cottage, I have understood her better," said Mercy; "I believe I am the only one who understands her in the world. All her life has been passed in hiding her true feelings, and calling it — duty! Too much duty in her,

and too little in my dear mistress, have brought about the same result. Oh! it drives me mad to think what fools they both have been!"

And the girl stamped her foot upon the pavement.

"I can see it all now," she cried; "and now it is too late! They should have been men's wives!"

"And are they not,—true and loving ones?"

"You can see, as well as I, what they are. One shows it by a word, and the other by an over-effort to appear her usual self betrays it too. I saw you had read them both, sir."

"Still, they are good wives?" I persisted.

"They are good slaves!"

We walked on in silence several streets'-length. Coming from the house, I had offered her my arm, and she had declined it, but we remained side by side, and, indeed, I had some difficulty to keep up with her.

Silently and rapidly we went from street to street, I thinking of her excited words, and all that they implied. They had but confirmed my own suspicions ; but I would have preferred them all my life mere doubts, and not have let this girl's assertion strengthen them into the certainties that there was no disputing. She spoke with an honest indignation that aroused my own—she must have been a witness to every step in the career of both mistaken wives.

And she was right—they were more slaves than wives. Hoping for the brighter days when the chain should gall less, the task be less hard, or the strength greater to bear. Slaves who looked at life differently, and went differently to work ; who were both unsuccessful, and both toiling on still ;—one fretful and wayward, and childish, the other still firm, and keeping back in her fortitude, trials known but to herself and her God.

There are all degrees of slavery ; but the

slavery that binds, from life unto death, the true to the false, and lets the false conquer—the firm to the weak, and yet gives to the weak no power to grow strong—is the worst and the harshest of bondage.

Slaves to the false ideas that led their steps awry—slaves of the ring!

CHAPTER V.

TWO MORE OLD FACES.

"I NEED not trouble you further," said Mercy, breaking the long silence. '

"Do you live near here?"

"Somewhat near," she said, in a hesitating manner; "but here is my father, to relieve you of the charge that was thrust on you."

"Not unwillingly, Miss Mercy, and not even thrust."

"Oh! I am not particular what word I choose," said she; "I will wish you good night here."

She seemed anxious to be gone before

her father came up; but Peter Ricksworth's long legs were too quick for her, and that grimy gentleman was soon in the flesh before me.

"What! another sweetheart, girl!" he exclaimed; "and yet—why, it's you, is it? It's very funny how I keep tumbling over *you* now."

He was sober for once, but none the more ingratiating for that. In his sober moods he was but a scowling, villainous-looking mortal, in whose company no man in his senses would care to remain long.

"Mr. Neider was kind enough to see me a little way home from Robin's, where I met him," explained Mercy.

"Right, my dear—I don't say anything agin' Mr. Neider—surely, if I doan't trust you, who have I to trust? And if I wor cross with you, who have I to care about and think anything of?"

And he drew her hand through his arm, with that strange tenderness towards her,

which had been always characteristic of his manner. It was like the affection of a wolf-dog for one that has been kind to it—but it told of better days, or a better nature in Peter Ricksworth.

“You’re looking well-fleshed, Mr. Neider,” said he, roughly; “it’s astonishing what a difference fine feathers make in one.”

“Father,” whispered Mercy, “he’s been very kind in seeing me so far on a way that you promised to meet me.”

“I doan’t mean any offence,” replied he; “I aren’t riled you, sir?” he inquired, apologetically.

“Not at all.”

“I was allus rough in my way, you see, and it allus gangrenes me a little to see swells about. I’ve got a kind of fancy, too, that they want to make off with my Mercy—for the only little bit of good that’s left in me, she keeps there. I saw an old sweet-heart of yours hanging about the house to-night, Mercy. He thought I hadn’t got my eye on him.”

"Whom do you mean?" cried Mercy.

"That Mr. Grey, who used to—you know?"

"You must have been dreaming, father."

"Devil a bit!"

"Or he must have been passing by chance. Don't you think he has forgotten all his old folly by this time?"

She said it in a loud tone, as though the question were put to me also; but I could not reply to it, and was as surprised as herself at Mr. Ricksworth's news. Grey had said so little of his romance of late months, and seemed, by his peace of mind and genial spirits, to have so utterly outlived it, that this sign of the past fascination took away my breath.

I glanced at Mercy. In her poor neat dress and plain cottage bonnet she still looked so beautiful, that I could excuse William Grey his passion. I even wondered at that moment if she would have made so bad a wife for William Grey, had

she married him for love. She had evinced that night much of shrewdness, forethought, and natural kindness of disposition. And his was so faithful a nature, and he would have been so different a husband from *others* that I knew.

"It's precious cold shivering here with the ghost of nothing warm inside a feller," said Ricksworth, buttoning his coat over his attenuated frame—I shuddered to see how thin he had become—"and what's more, there's nothing to be got by staying. Bid the gentleman good night, Mercy."

She bade me good night. I extended my hand, but she did not appear to see it; and old Ricksworth, with a vague idea that it might contain a *douceur*, took it instead, and returned it after a feeble shake.

"It is odd how you and I keep running agin each other, isn't it?"

"A little singular."

"I allus found that people who run agin me too much, allus turned out my blackest

persinel inimies—you'll be one of 'em too."

"No, I think not."

"I'm not so sure on it."

And, studying the question intently, Mr. Ricksworth took his departure, with Mercy on his arm.

I had not turned away, when I felt my own arm touched. All the faces of the past seemed destined to meet my own that night, although this one, so famine-pinched and haggard, took me a certain portion of time to recollect.

"Ipps," I said, at last.

"Ipps it be, sir—I thought you'd know me."

"Have you been with Ricksworth?"

"It doan't matter what company I keep now," said he, evasively; "it wor all through going on and deceiving the old measter."

"What are you doing?"

"Begging for a living—stealing for one when begging woan't answer—I wor always sharp for an old man."

"A sad confession, Ipps."

"All along o' Thirsk; he did it by leading an ould ignorant man into temptation," said he; "if it hadn't been along o' him!"

"Why don't you return to Welsdon in the Woods?"

"Welsdon workus!"

"Even that would be better than your present life."

"I'll never go into a workus," he cried; "I'd rather die out here in the streets, and that's what it'll come to, moind you."

"Have you anything more to say to me?"

"Only to ax you for an odd sixpence, for the sake of ould times. Upon my soul, I'm starving!"

And he looked it. I gave him the sixpence that he begged for, and he thanked me with something of the true professional whine, as I stepped out briskly towards my hotel.

I did not think of meeting him again,
under strange circumstances, in the days
that were ahead of me.

CHAPTER VI.

TO AND FRO.

IN my wish to do a little good, I had forgotten what harm might fall upon myself. In my concern for others, I paid no heed to signs and symptoms that might warn me of a folly. On my way blindly, with false confidence in the purity of all my motives, and, God knows, dreaming not of evil, I proceeded.

The picture of Harriet Genny's home, and Harriet Genny's changed looks, were photographed upon my brain, and had become part of myself. I could believe in a long life study to hide the truth from the

prying eyes of a curious society — to live on even away from herself, and all those thoughts she kept for ever down, and would not face. For Robin Genny, a drunkard, a gamester, and a spendthrift, had her life been sacrificed—and he, a coward, with no moral courage to resist, let her struggle on in hope of him, and made no effort to grow strong. The last friend or enemy, and the last word to sway him from his best intentions, and sink him deeper every day !

That he would ever change, or be, for one day, a better, wiser man, I could not believe ; and yet I would have given him my last penny had he needed it, for the heroic wife to whose true virtues he was blind.

I believe that this particular period of my career was the most unsettled and miserable of all—I was unhappy for no cause that I could account, save that I made Harriet Genny's troubles my own, and brooded

over them, and yet awoke not to the consciousness of truth.

My mother was anxious about me—my partner, Grey, looked at me dubiously—old Genny met me in the fields, and asked if I were well—people turned and gazed after me in the street. The farm life had become again an employment utterly distasteful; when I was at home I worked at it, and feigned an interest, for my partner's sake, but in my heart I cursed it, and all the common-places that belonged to it.

Can it be believed, even at that time, that I was anxious about Grey, whose danger was so much less than mine; or that, in the first week we met again, I spoke of meeting Ricksworth, and the comments he had made on discovering Grey's propinquity to his establishment? I was so very sure that the whole world was going wrong, and succumbing to temptation, save myself. I would have played Mentor in my egotism to the wisest head, and have gone

dashing on myself, a blind Telemachus.

"Grey, you have not forgotten Mercy Ricksworth?"

"Have I ever professed forgetfulness?"

"You went to London to see her—don't deny it!"

"My dear fellow, I am not going!"

"Is not this fluttering round the flame that may irreparably singe your wings again?"

"I have been only anxious to make sure that she was well," said he, calmly; "that in the midst of the troubles which have fallen on most of our little circle, she and those who bear her name have not encountered trials too heavy to sustain."

"And what did you discover?"

"That they are no better or worse off than in the country days—that she bears up with the same old spirit, trying to do her best for all, and sacrificing much for that infernal scamp of a father."

"I met him quite steady and sober."

"I think his wife keeps a sharp look-out after the money that she earns by needle-work ; but I heard in the neighbourhood all that was bad of him. I would have given fifty pounds to have heard a good report, for Mercy Ricksworth's sake !"

"Would you marry her, now that you have arrived at years of discretion, and all the romance of a first love has had time to be analyzed ?"

"She's a brave girl ! Yes."

"Pronounced incurable, Grey."

I laughed a little at his folly, and, with a greater folly hidden from him, I went back to London. I had always an excuse to stay in London a few days in each week now, which excuse was accepted as a matter of course by Grey, and considered a change that would do me good by my easily influenced mother.

I made Thirsk my friend ; I sought his society ; I fancied that my own would be of service to him, and keep him closer to his

home. And I was rewarded by Agatha's thanks, a difference at times in her husband's dark moods, and by a certain influence that I exercised occasionally over him—finally, by meeting at Thirsk's house Robin Genny's wife.

There was seldom much conversation between Harriet and me, but it was pleasant to see her now and then, and to sit and watch her talking to the young wife,—whose will was almost as weak as Robin Genny's,—and watch the animated play of her features, and the interest that was awakened thereon, now and then, by Agatha's enthusiasm, or Agatha's despair.

There were times more often when, in my frequent visits to the house at Chelsea, I found Thirsk absent, and yet sat down a welcome guest there; talked of departure and yet lingered, and did my best to add some little lightness to the thoughts of two anxious women. There were times when Harriet was absent also, and I departed,

after a few minutes' conversation, and found myself wandering towards Robin Genny's house, and pausing at the corner of the street and turning back again, too timid to intrude upon her home with anything that might seem as an excuse to her.

To and fro, to and fro, burnt up with inward fever, keeping back all thoughts that might have told me whither I was drifting, and playing ever the Samaritan. Frequenting strange haunts in search of Robin Genny, and more than once the means of bringing him to his home—and more than once attempting to preach to a mind as unstable as water the advantages of perseverance. I did all this for Harriet Genny's sake—I owned that, at least, to my heart. I had seen she was a suffering woman, who deserved a happier fate; if I could have brought a reformed husband to her side, her life would have been bright enough. But I had outlived all love for her—she was a wife, and beyond me—I only wished

to see her happy ! No thought of any kind to startle me would I indulge in, or give ear to. Ever to and fro upon the restless sea, absorbed in my strange visionary mission, that could not end in good, for there was evil in its midst. A sleeping evil, that might wake at any time and bring madness on me, so infatuated with my efforts had I grown.

To and fro, and still unwarned, even when by accident a late visit of Harriet to Mrs. Thirsk's compelled me to offer her my escort home. It was a long walk through crowded thoroughfares, and she had trust in me—it was a walk that reminded me of past days, and set my brain whirling with the past wild thoughts, that in common justice I should have outlived.

We spoke of Agatha Thirsk and her husband—of what an ill-assorted couple they were, and how the father's love for his child was the only sign of true affection.

“He will change—I believe he will change.”

"His is a hard mind, and she is a weak woman, whom he must naturally despise," said Harriet; "even her love for him is a weakness. In her love, and in her hope to benefit him, she deceives him."

"I do not understand you."

"This evening when I called, Sir Richard Freemantle was there."

"Sir Richard Freemantle!" I exclaimed.

"Yes—he visits his sister in Thirsk's absence, and is planning, I believe, something for Thirsk's benefit—but it is no more nor less than deceit."

"I think you are right—but still, strange methods are necessary with strange natures; and if Thirsk is to rise in life again, I believe it must be by the means of that brother-in-law to whom his antipathy is so great."

"Why not explain all to Mr. Thirsk?"

"I see you do not know Mr. Thirsk perfectly."

"I have cause to know him," she said.

She was thinking of her husband, and how Thirsk had led him astray, and might still be leading him for what she knew of the matter. I knew it by that weary sigh which can only escape the lips of a disappointed woman. She reverted to Sir Richard Freemantle with some abruptness; spoke of his eccentricities, his desire to make friends with Thirsk, of his growing and passionate affection for his sister's child.

"If he do good, perhaps this little secrecy between brother and sister may be excused," said Harriet; "you may be right, Mr. Neider—you who profess to know so much more of the wild nature of your friend. I may be deceived in him—I am not so vain of my own judgment as I used to be."

Somehow we drifted back to the old days at Follingay Farm, to the three farm pupils there, and the honest farmer whose ship had sunk with the great commercial fraud that had wrecked so many fortunes. Dear old times to me, but dangerous—for I was

younger then and more enthusiastic, and there was allied with them so much of the one romance that I had concealed so long, and the reminiscences of which thrilled me with a wondrous force.

"And you are finally a farmer, Mr. Neider?"

"Yes, for ever and aye a farmer."

"I have often thought that I offered you very bad advice, in recommending the literary profession—in urging you to follow the bent of your wishes, and seek a world wherein there is much jealousy and temptation. You are happy and content now—and the world of books, I think, is ever a restless one."

"Not happy and content, Mrs. Genny. I have been, all my life, a dissatisfied man."

She looked at me with two great startled eyes, and I felt the blood rushing to my face, a guilty witness of how long I had thought of her. All the rest of the way home she was strangely silent—I felt her hand

rested more lightly on my arm, as if some suspicion had been aroused, or she had now less faith in me. She bade me good night coldly at the corner of her street, and I went home bewildered and storm-driven.

And yet I could not think. I was a coward, who feared to think at last ; nearer and nearer the grim awful truth advanced, and I sat and confronted it, and would not see it.

She was a brave woman, who saw it also, and confuted me. The end was at hand, and I still dreaming, when the shock was given.

I had met her at Thirsk's house again—the hour was once more late, and we had left the house together.

“I shall not take you out of your way to-night, Mr. Neider,” she said, in a very different tone to that which she had heretofore adopted ; “our roads lie differently.”

"But the hour is late."

"I have no fear of anyone harming me," said Harriet Genny, proudly.

"Mrs. Genny," said I, rashly, "I shall accompany you!"

"Shall!" she echoed.

"Pardon me; but I spoke hastily, and did not think."

"Do you ever think?" she asked.

I shrunk from the steady searching light in her hazel eyes. For a moment I was at a loss for a reply, and she continued.

"You are a young man, neglecting the best chances of life," said she; "you are blind to those opportunities that should make a man of you. You can be doing no good by coming here so often, and you may bring about, unconsciously, much harm. I should like to shake hands now, Mr. Neider, and say good-bye for ever."

"God forbid!" I cried; "I feel you are unhappy, and that I might befriend you."

"You will never be a friend of mine," she said, firmly.

"Those are cruel words, Mrs. Genny. They dash down every hope—they——"

"Stay, sir!" she interrupted; "think of your own rash words, and to whom you address them. Think of your charge, that I am an unhappy woman—if false, how shameful of you; and if true, how wrong of you to say as much to me! There, sir, go your way," she added; "I shall not call here again—I have done no good here, I possess no charm to win back to Mrs. Thirsk the attentions of a man who loved her for her money. You are an honest man now, with a mother to love and a wife to seek—and I am a poor woman, who does not wish you, and who would not trust you, for a friend. You are as weak and cowardly as all the rest!"

"Will you tell me what to do."

"Never seek me, or those belonging to me, out again."

And with this adjuration, awfully stern, and delivered with vehemence, she darted away from me, and left me, standing in the dark streets.

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTIVITY.

THE indignant outburst of a true woman had brought me to myself. That which I had feared to set before me, she had torn the mask from. From her I might have expected it; she had had ever a will that flinched not from stern truths, when a truth, however stern, could strike at an evil. I felt that I was lowered in her eyes; that my sickly sentimentalism had degraded me, and that all past efforts in her eyes must now seem tinged with a falseness and baseness that would render my name ever a shame to her.

I went home that night, and reached the

farm at a late hour. I could not stay longer in London, isolated from all who still respected me. All the dangers to which I had closed my eyes were haunting me at last, and I thanked God for my escape.

The storm over, and the shame self-acknowledged, I turned to my work, I believe a more humble and better man. My eyes were opened to the duties I had neglected, as well as to the sunken rocks over which I had passed in safety, and by a hairbreadth. The feverish uncertainty of every step, the disregard of where the next might take me, the deep brooding on the unalterable, were all gone, and I began a new life, with a new energy, that surprised my partner in farming.

I became the man of business in earnest; the farm looked brighter in consequence, and farming life became quite a pleasurable excitement. I heard from Thirsk occasionally; his letters were less full of satire and irre-

verence; he seemed gradually taking a more hopeful view of his position.

"I think there is a chance of dropping in for something good," he wrote in his last letter; "I will give you the details when the good luck comes."

That Sir Richard Freemantle was at work to some purpose, I had no doubt, so I waited for the promised news, and trusted for his sake that it would arrive, before the dark hour fell for ever on him and his home. I knew he was not one to wait patiently for any length of time, and that "hope deferred," in his case, would make a desperate man of him.

It was in the autumn months, when I was drawn back into the old vortex from which I had made an effort to emerge—but drawn back never again to the moral weakness from which I had escaped by a miracle. Ever distant that day, thanks to Heaven and Harriet Genny!

The summons to the old world came

from Robin Genny himself. It was a letter from a lock-up in Chancery Lane, and underlined was the word *private*, at the top of the page which I unfolded.

A letter of some length, written with a hand that had been unsteady at first, but had gathered nerve as it proceeded; in a style that was easy and careless in many portions, laboured and painfully studied in others, but that from beginning to end betrayed not the slightest sense of shame at his position, or the recklessness that had brought him unto it. He spoke of the uncomfortableness of his position, of the enemies he had in the world, and the paucity of friends; never a word about his past misconduct, or his faithful wife, whose life had been a sacrifice and martyrdom. It was a letter that stood as a fair exposition of his character—clever and witty to a certain extent, but cruelly, if unwittingly, heartless throughout.

“I write to you, my dear Neider,” he

concluded, "because, in the first place, you have testified a friendliness for me that I have hardly deserved; and, in the second—I speak frankly—because you are the only man of my acquaintance who is able to help me at this pinch, even for so beggarly a sum as eighty-seven pounds. Had I not been certain of laying before you a scheme for a prompt repayment of that money, of course I would not have hinted for the requisite 'needful' to free me from this 'durance vile.' If you will favour me with a look-in this afternoon, you will eternally oblige,

"Your faithful friend,

"ROBIN GENNY."

In search of that faithful friend I went that afternoon, and found him with a quart mug of porter before him, and a long clay pipe in his mouth.

I had kept my mission to London a secret; and with that "requisite needful" at

which he had delicately hinted, in my pocket, I arrived at Chancery Lane, to inquire into the nature of those difficulties which had naturally closed round him.

Robin Genny was so glad to see me, that I thought he would never leave off shaking my hand.

"I always knew you were a trump-card," said he; "by Jove!—how can I ever thank so good a fellow as you are!"

"By not getting into this mess again, or the last friend may be also missing."

"If I ever borrow a penny again, or spend a penny that is not rightfully my own, may I be left to die of despair in the pleasant shades of Whitecross Street!"

"Where is Mrs. Genny?"

"At home, or wandering about trying to appease flinty-hearted creditors, or engaged on some mission which is sure to go wrong without money to back it. Upon my soul," he cried, lightly, "I think she could get on in the world much better

without me. She'd have less worry, and always know where I was. It is the uncertainty of my whereabouts that always keeps her unsettled."

"You will set to work with a mind a trifle more stable, after this?"

"To be sure."

"Or you had better stay here."

"That's true enough. But the burnt child fears the fire, you know, Neider. Have you brought the money with you?" he asked, eagerly.

"Yes."

"Then I'll just give you some idea of my scheme for repayment," said he. "You remember me speaking of a new magazine to Thirsk—well, I have the plan all cut and dried now, and it will be a fortune to every one concerned in it."

"That's lucky."

He looked hard at me, as if a certain dryness in my tones had suggested my doubt of his assertions. He began to

launch forth into a mass of details, upon which he had been pondering the last two days, and I did my best, in courtesy, to listen to him. But I had no confidence in the scheme, or in his capabilities for prosecuting it. I had come wilfully, and in cold blood, to get rid of eighty-seven pounds, and I entertained not the faintest idea of ever seeing one penny of my money back. I believed even in his heart that I had lost caste by my weakness, though he was not slow to profit by it. Writing to me had been a forlorn hope, on which he had not built much, and my appearance had been even a surprise to him.

He talked so much of repayment, as though to keep up my courage to settle what he termed "his little account," that I finally lost patience.

"You will repay me by showing me that it is possible to become a steady man, and not break your wife's heart by a lack of moral courage!" I cried.

He stared at me.

"Well, I haven't been the best of Benedicts, perhaps," said he; "I must do all my work at home after this. Doctor Jennings told me only last week that I couldn't keep up much longer at the old rate—and if a fellow will not take his doctor's warning, why, he deserves the very worst."

He said it very heartily. I have no doubt he was full of the best resolutions for amendment then; that with no temptation before him in that hour, his heart was beginning to glow at the picture of his temperate future, with his wife happy by his side. He even grew enthusiastic over her merits.

"What a woman she has been!" he cried; "I should have been dead without her. And never a harsh word, or a frown, at my brutish misconduct, or even a bucket full of tears, *à la Mrs. Thirsk*—but a gentle remonstrance at times, and always the right

word in the right place. Upon my soul," he affirmed a second time, "I begin to think I was hardly worthy of her."

A *naïve* confession, at which I could not help smiling; it was delivered with such heartiness, and yet with such latent egotism.

It took a little while to arrange matters, before Genny obtained his release. When he was free, he insisted upon carrying me home triumphantly in a Hansom cab, to receive the thanks of his wife. I resisted to the verge of rudeness, but he was as extravagant with delight as a child, and would receive no refusal. He held me firmly by the arm, and I could only have struggled with him for my release. We went to Gray's Inn Road, and he, talking loudly and gesticulating wildly, led the way to the house where his presence was unlooked for.

"Hymns of praise to the deliverer!" he cried, thrusting me forward into the room

where sat Harriet Genny, pale and agitated,
and Farmer Genny, looking as firm and as
hard as a rock.

CHAPTER VIII.

STORMY.

IF Robin Genny had anticipated being received with much apparent rejoicing, he was doomed to a proportionate disappointment; and had I been a lover of thanks, or of visible demonstrations of gratitude, my reception would have certainly appeared chilling.

Harriet bade me good day in a constrained and pre-occupied way, and let her husband seize her two hands and shake them with but little attempt at a reciprocity of feeling; her uncle kept his seat, and motioned to his nephew and me to be seated.

"Well, isn't this a slice of luck now?" cried Robin Genny.

"Ay, in its way," replied his uncle, who took the lead as spokesman, and even frowned down Harriet, who would have broken in here. "Mr. Neider," turning to me, "I've been boold enough to ask Mr. Grey for a holiday, in order to coom here and see my niece upon this matter."

"I don't think we need go into it, uncle," said Robin, easily; "it's all settled and square, and Mr. Neider has been kind enough to steal a march on those good friends who might have helped me too."

"How did Mr. Neider learn your embarrassments, Robin?" asked his wife.

"Upon my word, it's not worth while going into," said he; "and I see there are half a dozen letters on the mantelpiece that require answering. Will you pass them over, Harriet, dear?"

The letters were given him, and he took

them up one by one and examined their superscriptions. His uncle, who had been watching him all this time, suddenly burst forth—

“Can’t ye pay attention for a little while, and not take it always so darmed coolly? Bean’t it possible to put you into an honest passion, and make ye—joost for once—noicely ashamed of yourself? Ye wrote to me, too, by the same post, and I’ll take the liberty of answering ye.”

Robin Genny laid down his letters at this adjuration; he would have preferred fair sailing and calm weather, but storms were thrust upon him. He looked helplessly, almost imploringly, towards his wife, and she, in return, made one faint effort to stay her uncle’s voice, but the old man stood firm and would not flinch. He answered his niece’s glance, in his own way, however, and she coloured at his reply, which was as follows:—

“Ye’re thinking it would be better

talked over without Mr. Neider; I'm thinking not, now we're so much indebted to him, and remembering the many talks we three have had together, and the little good it's doon that fellow there."

He pointed to Robin, who moved uneasily beneath the finger of scorn, and fidgeted with the letters, and looked down at the table.

"Mayhap, with Mr. Neider to be a witness to his future promises, he'll make some stronger effort to keep 'em square."

"I cannot but think I am an intruder," said I, half rising.

"Sit ye doon—sit ye doon," roared Genny; "I've much to say to ye, and ye can't go yet, sir. We're in your debt at present."

"No, sir—I——"

"I say we're in your debt," repeated Genny; "and we're all of one family here, who maun't have ye help us quite so fast! Mr. Neider, will ye sit doon, now?"

I sat down, and he drew forth a pocket-book, and took a letter therefrom.

"I'm thinking this came by the same post as yours," said Genny; "my nephew thought at least he'd kill two birds—if it worn't more—with one stone. In it he talks aboot me being the only friend capable of helping him, and how sure he be to pay the mooney back—just as I have no doot he said to ye, sir. He doan't say much of being sorry to foind himself in such disgraceful quarters, and he says never a word of the shame his woife must share with him. I don't see, in all the long story that these loines contain, one mite of feeling for any-one save—Robin Genny."

"I did not care to parade my feelings in a letter," he cried; "have I been so hard and unfeeling a man that you should think me so ungenerous?"

"Ye're not very *hard*," was the dry rejoinder; "and as for your feelings, why, ye've lots of 'em ready to hand, and to

spare, for the matter o' that—but they're butterfly feelings, and doan't affect ye much. They're play-actors' feelings a'most, Robin—and last about as long."

"No, no!" he cried.

"I say, Yes!" and thump came the hand of his excited uncle on the table.

"Harriet, is this so?" he cried, not feeling inclined to give up that point so easily.

"I have seen no evidence to the contrary for many a long month," she answered, sadly.

It was the first time in her life that she had sided against him, or seemed to do so, and he looked surprised at her rejoinder.

"How you have all mistaken me!" he said, in almost a whisper; and his restless hand took up the letters on the table, and dropped them, and took them up again.

His uncle referred once more to the pocket-book, and then, with a sudden dash, some new bank-notes were fluttered across in my direction.

"They be yours, Mr. Neider," said he; "eighty-five poonds worth—and there's two sovereigns to make eighty-seven;" and they were spun across the table after the notes—"and if ye'll let me know what extra legal expenses ye've been made to pay, I'll be obliged to ye."

"I can't have this!" I cried.

"Ay—but ye moost!" affirmed Genny, senior; "I can't have my niece obligated to ye. Most of my mooney—it bean't much now—would have coom to her some day—it's only a little afore the toime, now she's in such trooble. Ye can put it in your pocket, Mr. Neider, for I'll drop down dead before I take it back!"

"If it must be, then," I said.

"And now, Robin Genny, just attention."

The old master of Follingay Farm leaned his two arms across the table, and bent his keen, grey eyes upon his nephew, who tried to bear up against them, and failed—as he always failed in everything.

"Will ye leave off that darmnable fidget with the letters?" he began.

"Go on—go on," said his nephew, impatiently.

"It's to me ye're indebted now, consider that. It's for your woife's sake, not your oon—consider that too, Robin. I've no more hope in my heart of your better goings on from this toime, than I ever had hope in the comfort which your marriage was to bring ye. If I'm deceived, Robin, ye'll make that heart much loighter, that's **all.**"

"I have been unlucky."

"Ye ha' been a fool," said his uncle, "and led loike a fool, and had little will of your oon. Men more cunning than yourself ha' made a dupe and a laughing-stock o' ye; and ye've turned away from Harriet—your best friend!—and sacrificed her for them. It's loike ye—it's been always loike ye, moind! I haven't been here so many toimes, not to see how she's been suffering,

and suffering more because she's fought to hoide it, and tried to make *me*, of all men, think how happy she was in her home and husband. I haven't watched ye, Robin, for her sake, and not foond out the folly o' the match that was brought round at last."

"I have been wrong," confessed Robin ;
"let us end this !"

"When ye played fast-and-loose with her—loved her for a week or two, and then forgot her in Loondon—I had a hope that the engagement would end in nothing; but when ye had worn her love oot, and toired her heart away from ye, ye bound her to the old foolish oath, and she, in the face of common sense, went with ye. She may say what she loikes, and ye may think it, but that's the truth, I saw with my own eyes."

Robin Genny had some pride, though it might be difficult to rouse. It flashed up then, and he turned towards his wife.

"Say all this is a lie, Harriet !" he cried.
She did not answer ; with one hand

clutching the mantelpiece, as though to prevent herself from falling, she stood and listened to her uncle's torrent of invective, and watched the varying shades of her husband's countenance. She saw that he winced, and felt all the force of the rebuke, and she was building up new hopes from his remorse.

"Say he sits there speaking falsely, Harriet," he said again; "wrong at least in that, he may think he has judged me before and since as incorrectly. I haven't been so bad! God knows, I'm not bad now, Harriet!"

He waited for her answer.

"What can I say?" she said; "what is your idea of love?—or what was it ever, Robin? I married you in the hope of saving you from ruin—to be your companion and adviser, watching over you, and being ever faithful to you, and studying, with all my heart, and soul, and strength, to make this home a happy place, which you

might prefer to all the world. I had promised your mother on her death-bed to do this—I did not shrink from the fulfilment, when you loved me less, and yet held me to my word.”

“There!” cried Robin, triumphantly; but the sad faces that met him dashed his exultation. He thought Harriet had confuted all aspersions, and yet, on second thoughts, it was a strange answer. He was considering it when she left the mantel-piece, and came and stood before him with her crossed hands on his shoulder. He looked up at her, and then down again. No, he could not meet *her* eyes then—~~they~~ were so searching, bright, and fearless.

“I do not repine—I have never repined, Robin,” she said; “if I have been cruelly disappointed in you, I have made no sign till now. Now, at this time, when for better, for worse, we set forth again together, I have let my uncle speak for your good and my own. I believe that he would like to speak

of the future too—but I, who have a share in it, assert my right to dwell on that. Confessing now that the past life was killing me—for every minute of that life was a suspense—I confess to a hope that all is ended, and there is before us something different and more bright. I only ask you, Robin, to believe it also, to cast off the old habits, trust in me a little, and let this be a home for both of us. It is my last chance of happiness, and your last chance of becoming an honourable man—shall we wreck them both together?”

“No!”

He started to his feet, he wrung her hands in his, he caught her to his breast and kissed her, he dropped into his chair again, and burst into a passionate torrent of tears.

“Two friends—perhaps the only two ye have, Robin—bear ye witness in this room to that promise,” said Genny; “I pray ye may have strength of moind to keep it.”

“I will—upon my soul I will!” he said,

bringing forth, in the midst of his abandonment, that old, awful pledge to everything.

"Then we needn't stay any longer, I'm thinking, Mr. Neider," said the uncle.

"I'm ready," I said, rising.

"If I ha' been rather hasty, and forgotten joost now and then, sir, that I'm the servant now, ye'll not think of it?"

"Is it likely?"

"Ye see it's cost me eighty-seven poonds to speak my moind, and they were hardly arned."

"If——"

"I'm not regretting the loss so far as ye're concerned," said he, quickly; "I'll think it the blessedest lot of mooney ever spent if it makes a different place of this house, and a different pair of those two. Ha' ye anything more to say to me, nephew?"

"No, uncle—no."

He kept his face still covered with his thin hands, and continued to cry like a

child. One hand of Harriet's still remained on his shoulder, and the anxious wife's face seemed shadowed even then with a doubt as she stood there, a watchful sentinel.

"Then good-bye to both of ye! I'll look in on your *new home* one day next week."

Harriet left her husband's side to thank me.

"I must have seemed unthankful, Mr. Neider, for your very generous intentions. Let me thank you now."

"There is nothing to thank me for, Mrs. Genny."

"This has been a strange and stormy meeting for you to witness here."

"After the storm comes a calm—you remember."

"God grant it!"

She turned away to hide the tears that sprang up in her eyes, and her uncle and I took our departure from the home wherein repentance had been promised, and

which, judging by promises, was to be henceforth so bright.

One part of this story may close here with a few more lines—the fewer the better, as the end is sad, and the vanity of human hopes, and the fallacy of human dreaming, sorrowfully exemplified. There are natures for some hidden reason known to the Great Ruler, so utterly weak, so devoid of a *something* that should make them rational, reflective beings, that it is hard to judge them by the common standard of what is right and honest. One might as well judge little children by the laws governing sober men and women; and it seems to me at least—I may be wrong and rash to think so deeply—that the radical defects which we were born with, or may inherit, will be considered in our favour when the scales are turning against us in the Day for which we sinners wait.

It was the nature of Robin Genny to be



unstable. All his life he had meant well and acted badly—letting the impulse of the present hour sway his present actions. There was some awful defect in his vacillating brain that ruled him—a reckless inconsideration for others in the hour of temptation, or an utter forgetfulness of everything that he had sworn to but a little while ago. His mother had seen it, and prayed against it; his wife had seen it, and striven hard to find the remedy; he had become aware of it himself, and pledged his soul to work a cure.

And in a fortnight from that day the wife sat up for him night after night, and he came reeling home again, to cry, and promise amendment once more — and all the brightness of that life she had looked forward to, and yet despaired of, went out and left a greater density. We did not know it then, Genny and I; part of it we were able only to guess, by the end that came upon him suddenly — for Harriet was a wife

who made no parade of her wrongs.

Robin Genny died of delirium tremens, before the promises, to which I had stood as witness, were three months old!

END OF THE FIFTH BOOK.

BOOK VI.

" Evil is wrought by want of thought."

" Man wrongs, and Times avenges."

BYRON.

" One adequate support
For the calamities of mortal life
Exists—one only: an assured belief
That the procession of our fate, howe'er
Sad or disturbed, is ordered by a Being
Of infinite benevolence and power;
Whose everlasting purposes embrace
All accidents, converting them to good."

WORDSWORTH.

CHAPTER I.

A LITTLE MYSTERY.

AFTER the death of Robin Genny our farm at Edmonton lost an able hand. Mr. Genny gave us formal notice of his departure, a fortnight or so following the loss.

“I ha’ been thinking it all oover, Mr. Neider,” said he, after the notice had been given, and received with regret by Grey and me; “and it’s koind of braced up my pluck to go at the world again. I ha’ got over the loss of my thoosands, and feel that with my two hoondred odd, there’s a chance of living as a coomfortable little shopkeeper soomwhere, with Harriet for house-

keeper. She be a widow, and alone in the world, and I maun think o' her a little."

"To be sure."

"When I was a richer man, I was maun hard in my ways, and she came in for a part of my ill-tempers, and the greed that was in me. I'm getting older and more sensible; and as she'll never marry again—'never's' her word, poor woman!—why, I must be soomthing loike a father to her while I live. She was always my favourite niece, and I can't see her standing by herself in those black weeds. It goes to the heart that be now a little softer, sir."

"It was always a good heart, Mr. Genny."

"I'm obliged to ye for saying so," said he, with a bow; "though I'm not so sure of it myself. Do ye moind how I turned poor Mercy away, because she had brought me no character to back her?"

Surely I remembered that, and surely Grey did, by his red face and extra attention.

"I ha' been speaking to her lately—wanting her to live with Harriet and me, in the new house I think of taking, but she woan't leave that wretched, wicked old father o' hers. She has a silly fancy that she's a check upon him, and he goes on in much the same style—a kind of harder and nubbly likeness of what poor Robin was. I'm thinking," he said, heartily, "when it pleases the Lord to take him too, it will be a blessed comfort to every one of his acquaintance."

"What shop do you think of opening, Mr. Genny?" I inquired.

"I wouldn't moind a corn-chandler's—it remoinds me of the horses and the farm a good deal; or I wouldn't moind a cottage with a fair bit of land to it—just an acre or two—to potter over and get a living from. Ah! that last would be maun to an old farmer's taste now."

Grey and I exchanged glances. There was a small cottage on our land, let to one

of our farm-labourers; if we were to add a few acres from the broad lanes attached to our farm, and sublet to Matthew Genny, it would please our old master, and I nodded to Grey, as senior partner, to make the offer.

“Ye doan’t mean it!” cried Genny, looking ten years younger at the suggestion; “why, that’s good of ye, boys, and I’ll never forget it. It’s what I wouldn’t ha’ doon on my own land, though; for people will interfere and get to hoigh words when they’re next door to each oother, and at the same occupation.”

“You would not have refused the old master who perhaps taught you farming in *his* day,” I said.

“Ay, that makes a difference.”

So in due course the cottage was tenanted by Matthew Genny and a silent young woman, who wore a widow’s cap. I went there once or twice in the first week after their arrival; but her looks told me so

plainly that I was an intruder, taking advantage of my position, and that even to see me in the early days of her widowhood was to give her pain. My presence there brought all the old associations too keenly to her mind, and perhaps she could not trust me even yet! I gave up visiting Matthew Genny; I saw no more of his niece. If there had been a fitful, flashing hope of a new life for me, I gave it up; not that I loved her less, or doubted my power to make her happy—but that I read upon her face no pleasure at my visits, no embarrassment at meeting me. Naturally we crossed each other's path by chance sometimes, but the greeting became ever more cold and distant, and I read a truth therefrom, in which my pride could but acquiesce. There had been a visionary hope of something different, but it went farther and farther from me, and left me with Grey and my mother in the farmhouse parlour.

So time went on—a quiet, matter-of-fact

time, that I did not think to see seriously disturbed again, and little dreamed that the elements of storm and discord were only gathering strength by their inaction. Not so much a storm to sweep over me and mine, but to fall on others whose names have passed before the reader in these pages, and to affect me in my turn.

Six or seven months had passed; the spring had come again; the farm was profitable; Grey and I were at least outwardly content—Grey was content, for there was true philosophy inherent in him—the calm weather appeared to have finally settled down upon us, when Sir Richard Freemantle made his second appearance at the farm.

“You see I have not forgotten you, Mr. Neider,” he said on entering; “but I have been very busy in my way, and *you* have not troubled me with much news.”

“I have had no news to communicate, Sir Richard.”

"Pardon me, but you are Mr. Thirsk's friend, and any news concerning my sister's husband is of great importance to me. I think you promised to let me know," he added, reproachfully.

"Pardon me, in my turn, but I did *not* promise."

The baronet looked surprised.

"Any news of great importance I would have willingly communicated," said I; "more especially if it were good news. But I made no promise to play the spy, however worthy your intentions respecting Mr. Thirsk may be."

"Spy!" echoed Sir Richard; "my dear sir, you don't think for a moment that I consider you a spy?"

"No. But you expected me in some respects to act like one."

The baronet shook his head. He could not, and he would not, see it in that light.

"I merely wished for news of him. News that might afford me some idea of

his present temperament, and which, acting upon, might tend to good."

"I believe that."

"Thank you."

"But such news was readily obtainable from his sister, whom you visited in his absence."

Sir Richard stood regarding me with a blank expression. He had not intended to place at that time all his confidence in me, and was amazed at my knowledge of his tactics. He was alarmed, too, at that knowledge, for he said at last—

"Mr. Thirsk does not know—anything?"

"Fortunately, nothing."

"How came *you* to know, Mr. Neider?"

"Your sister's manner suggested the suspicion."

"She must be more on her guard, or she will betray all," exclaimed this amiable conspirator.

"Is not this a dangerous game to play, Sir Richard?" I observed; "and you will

excuse me, but is it the right way to proceed with Mr. Thirsk ? ”

“ I will be glad to hear of another way, Mr. Neider.”

Another way did not suggest itself to my mind just then.

“ Seeking out Mr. Thirsk and offering my friendship—my influence, my money—would that offer be fairly received, do you think ? ”

“ I fear not.”

“ And for my sister’s sake—for my sister’s child’s sake—that influence, and that money, must be exercised now. He has fallen in position—and his moods are so variable, that it is impossible to see at present whether this trial will be for evil or good. I find his wife hopeful one day, on the verge of despair a second—now buoyed up by a few careless words of affection, then deserted for a week together. If he neglect his duty to my sister, I have a brother’s to perform. I would be more

open and straightforward, if I were dealing with a more straightforward nature."

"I do not doubt it, Sir Richard," said I, "but—"

"But again!" he said, a little peevishly.

"But you were very hard on one Mercy Ricksworth, for not acting quite straightforwardly—for acting as she also thought best for the happiness of Mrs. Thirsk."

"I do not set myself up as immaculate," said the baronet; "more, I confess I was too harsh and precipitate with Mercy. Since then I have striven more than once to make amends to her—and—and we are very good friends now."

"And she aids you in a manner similar to that for which she was summarily dismissed."

"For her mistress's good this time. You are hard upon me to-day, Mr. Neider."

"I have been thinking over the singular changes that have happened to reverse the position of you and Mr. Thirsk—it is all a

tangled skein, the unravelling of which must become a matter of some difficulty."

"I am not so sure of that," was the confident answer.

"I am glad to hear it."

"You have not seen Mr. Thirsk lately?"

"No, but I have heard from him more than once. And it appears to me that his letters are imbued with a better feeling, and speak of a mind more reconciled to his position."

"I am very glad," said Sir Richard heartily.

"He appears falling into the track of literature; many articles which he has written have been fairly criticized and talked about—and fair words are a great incentive to exertion."

"My sister Agatha sometimes fancies that *your* fair words have done him no little good. I am sorry that you have not seen him lately."

"It is so difficult to find him," I remarked;

"I hear that he is more steady — and there is an adage concerning leaving the well alone."

"A foolish adage, that would keep the world at a stand-still."

Sir Richard did not stay long at the farm; he had obtained but few particulars, and the object of his coming scarcely appeared to be apparent. Of Nicholas Thirsk and his movements, his sister could better inform him than I. Thirsk and I had not met for months, and his letters were few and far between. After the baronet had gone, the fancy came to me that he had wished to prepare me for a change—had intended a revelation perhaps of some importance, had I not touched his dignity a little, by discoursing of that innocent duplicity which, for the good of his brother-in-law, he had recently adopted.

And yet he had been a man to keep something back all his life; outwardly cold and unobservant, and restraining his affections

from becoming too assertive. With a feeling heart, ever under a veil, his character had not been guessed at by his more impulsive sister, who had judged him by his abstracted air and his uncongenial studies. Candidly speaking, the baronet's nature was not a noble one; there were too many tortuous paths in it to raise it very high. He was a man who meant well, but who prosecuted most of his good actions in a secret, underhanded way that did not often end well. People misjudged his character, and misrepresented his actions; in the past he had made an enemy of Nicholas Thirsk; in the present he might do the same, if he were not extremely cautious. If Thirsk were once more suspicious of the movements of the baronet, all the latter's card-board schemes must inevitably fall beneath a mind more hard, perhaps more designing, than his own.

The baronet's visit was not three weeks' old before the little mystery that might have en-

wrapped it gave signs of clearing up. Nicholas Thirsk himself arrived on horseback at the farm. Time, or sober thought, or friendly appreciation of his literary efforts, had ostensibly rendered his fall in life less irksome. His face was no longer shadowed by that morbid train of thought, which, impressed on so swarthy a countenance, almost verged on the Satanic; there was a laughing look in his bright eyes, and he carried his head on his shoulders with a lightness and ease very new to him at any time. If he had stepped once more into his fortune of sixty thousand pounds, he could not have appeared in better spirits that day. Still his was a variable countenance; to-morrow, a check to his plans, and he would be next door to a maniac; to-day, a windfall, however light, in his way, and if it pleased his fancy it would utterly transform him.

He sprung from his horse, and woke up the echoes of the farm by shouting over the

palings of the yard at some men who were working beyond—

“See to my mare, and don’t get within range of her hind heels, for she’s playful at times.”

After this caution, he came along the garden path towards the house. His instructions had been worth attending to, for in a few moments two or three men were dancing round the mare, whose evolutions kept them at a distance, and two more were hanging on to the bridle, and trying to “hold her head,” as the term runs, and one was on his back in the road.

“That’s a dangerous horse for the father of a family to ride,” said I, meeting Thirsk, and shaking hands with him.

“Only a mare of mettle,” observed Thirsk; “I abominate jog-trot quadrupeds, with no fire in them. And when there is fire at my brain and hope at my heart, I like to dash along, Neider.”

“What has happened?”

“Good news has happened for once—won’t you congratulate me?”

“With all my heart,” said I; “come in.”

We entered the farm-house parlour, where my mother awaited an introduction to Nicholas Thirsk. It was quite a ceremonious affair that introduction—Thirsk made a profound bow, and treated my mother with reverential courtesy. I had an idea that Mr. Thirsk was inclined even to verge on the burlesque, in the few remarks with which he favoured my mother—remarks on her son, his virtues, accomplishments, and industry, in all of which my mother coincided, and inwardly considered Mr. Thirsk one of the most amiable—not to say discerning—gentlemen she had ever had the pleasure to meet.

Thirsk turned a laughing look in my direction when he had finished his encomiums.

“Don’t you agree with us, Neider?”

"Oh! of course."

"And here's Grey to agree with us also," said Thirsk, as my partner entered at this moment; "we are singing to the praise and glory of Alf. Neider, matter-of-fact man."

"Who says he's matter-of-fact?" said Grey, after the first salutations were over.

"His life says so," answered Thirsk; "his practical, unpoetical, persevering farmer's life. Did he ever nurse a romance or a folly, or a wrong, to throw him off that aggravating equilibrium of his?"

"Perhaps he did," said Grey, sententially.

"I won't believe it," answered Thirsk; "I had my ideas once regarding him, but I was mistaken. And if he is unimpressible, and thoughtful, and keeps his heart from going off at full gallop, why, he's an enviable being, who can smile at such rackety scamps as you and I, Grey."

"Ah!—rackety scamps, indeed!" said Grey.

"One or two of the Neider sort would make excellent friends for us ne'er-dowells," continued Thirsk; "but they keep their distance, and turn rusty when their good advice is not instantly followed—forgetting that there are some soils which take time to permeate. Neider, you deserted me!"

"Not till half-a-dozen attempts to discover your whereabouts."

"Forgiven, sir, forgiven, or I should not be in this farm of yours. Pooh!—it's horribly hot here!—let us escape into the fresh air and sunshine, where I can breathe freely. Show me your land, and let me offer you my wise opinion upon the condition of the crops—was not I a farm-pupil once?"

Grey took this as a hint not to accompany us, and Thirsk and I went over the land—or, rather, over the first field—across


which he and I walked, and talked of the better days in store for one of us.

"Fortune has been more kind to me than I deserved, Neider," said he, passing his arm through mine ; "and for once the grim Parcæ scowl not threateningly at me. Is a salary of five hundred a-year to be despised in these grasping times, Neider ? "

"Certainly not."

"Then congratulate me, and the lucky lift that is to take me out of Eccles Street, Chelsea, and be damned to it!—that is to free me from the desk work, and the eternal spin-spin of the brains, and the proof-sheets, and be—no, I won't consign them to purgatory too. Wish me joy, old fellow—the sun rises on a dark estate, and chases away half the shadows."

We shook hands together over the prospect of his future position in life ; he was in high spirits, light-hearted, and extravagant. He was a man born for a loftier position than my own, and an approach to it as surely



changed him for the better, as a descent to the minor cares of a shabby-genteel life reduced him to the worse.

“My father brought me up to consider myself a rich man—the heir to an estate the old rascal had already mortgaged, and to a name that has gained a wonderful celebrity in West-end halls and on West-end pavements after midnight. My father, the studious man, and the man of science, as some people call him—glory be to his name for ever and ever, though!”

“I don’t see what you are driving at, Thirsk.”

“Don’t you see that I am in an effervescent mood,” cried he, “and can say nothing—explain nothing—soberly and rationally.”

“Make the effort for once.”

“To oblige you, here goes.”

We were arm-in-arm again, and he was walking with me at a rapid pace across the meadow.

"My father offers to smoke the pipe of peace again—writes me a letter, informing me that he is aware of a parliamentary gentleman of distinction, who requires a private secretary, and can stand five hundred pounds per annum, and a snug villa on his estate into the bargain. And my father thinks of his son, and accepts at once for that estimable young gentleman."

"And it is settled."

"Almost. I open a correspondence with the M.P., and all things are agreed upon; I suit the M.P., and the M.P.'s salary suits me, and there's a margin of time for the literary market, if I am ever inclined to supply it. I was on a special message in the country when the last news came, and was expected to remain there a few days, and report the full particulars of four days racing for the *Bunkum Chronicle*. As if I could remain four days on a desolate island with such good news to gloat over; as if I could write reports upon horse-

racing, with such a tale to relate to all my friends and acquaintances."

"I thought you never had any friends, Thirsk."

"Well, only one. And a sly, dry humbug he is. Look at him."

And he thrust me suddenly from him with a hearty force.

"I throw up my commission, come express to London, and hire a horse of mettle to bring me to Edmonton. You are the first to hear the good luck that is in store for me."

"Thank you for the preference—but your wife?"

"She and the baby will be the next recipients of glad tidings. And you shall ride back with me to town and participate in the general sunshine. God save the Queen, and all members of Parliament in authority under her—especially those who require private secretaries."

I could not very well refuse to accompany

him to London. I had had so little opportunity of witnessing his genial moods, that to excuse myself just then was hardly grateful, after the trouble he had taken to discover me. I believe that Thirsk really set me at the head of his friends—that there was a wild, fitful attachment in his heart towards me; and, believing it, I could not refuse him on so auspicious an occasion the satisfaction that he fancied my company might bring him.

I was a little curious also to see the effect the news would have on Mrs. Thirsk, and to discuss the changes it might bring to both of them. So my own mare was saddled, and we rode away to London together.

CHAPTER II.

AFTER THE CALM.

THERE was not much opportunity for discussion offered on the road to London, Nicholas Thirsk's vicious horse keeping up a small *furor* all the way, and Nicholas, in the height of his excitement, wanting to leap hedges and to race me along the road.

I strove to bring him to a more rational mood by depreciating the advantages of the change awaiting him, whenever there was an opportunity of keeping our horses side by side.

“Don't think all the happiness of life is coming with five hundred a-year, Thirsk,”

I said ; "surely you earn as much now, or your profession earns less than the world gives it credit for."

"I may earn it. I have not counted up the receipts," said Thirsk in reply ; "but it's an unsettled living for me—and the truth is, I can't sober down to incessant scribbling. And then there are so many good fellows to spend my money amongst ; late hours to keep, house rent and taxes to pay, and it's not like a regular income to a man. And as I haven't a good name for punctuality and despatch, why, it's only a windfall here and there that drops to my share. Besides, as a private secretary, the hours are to be few and the pay handsome, Neider."

"If you turn more prudent and steady, it will be a good change, Thirsk."

"I have been thinking it all over. I am going to be such a first-class moral creature after this !" he cried.

"Do you mean it, or do you jest ?"

"I mean it this time," said Thirsk; "I have been thinking it all over in the railway train, in the intervals between my prayers and thanksgivings."

"Ah! it's a jest, I see."

"No, it is not," said Thirsk, for a moment assuming a more serious tone; "for the thought did strike home to me that there were many hundreds more deserving of my luck, and that I had not been a good husband, father, or anything else. I had been selfish and full of evil, and as dangerous to trifle with as a powder-magazine—taking misfortune with a curse, and a stroke of good luck as a right to which I was entitled. Now the steady times are really coming!"

"I am glad to hear you say so."

"No more wild dashes in search of excitement or forgetfulness—no more of the fiery waters of Lethe to be had at every licensed victualler's—temperate, and calm, and methodical from this time forth.

Hurrah!—see me bilk the toll-keeper, and astonish his weak nerves!”

He dug his spurs into the mare’s side, he struck her furiously with his whip, and away he went, at a headlong pace, through the open turnpike gate, and down the broad road beyond, before the toll-keeper had time to urge the faintest remonstrance.

As I paid for Mr. Thirsk, there was not much gained by his rapid dash past, and as he remembered, a moment afterwards, that the ticket he had paid for passing through that afternoon covered his return, there was only a laugh at his own effort to be dishonest in spite of himself.

We reached Chelsea before dark ; when we were in Eccles Street he said—

“We must stable our horses for half an hour or so.”

“You do not intend a long stay at home, then?”

“We dine out,” said Thirsk ; “it is late, and Agatha is not prepared for our reception.

After dinner we will return, and spend the evening together *en famille*. What!" he cried, "do you fear me in the very first step that I make?"

A livery stables having been discovered, in the neighbourhood of Eccles Street, we left our horses in charge, and repaired to that little residence beyond the posts, where the scenes of Thirsk's home drama had had but little lightness in them.

But the lightness was coming then, he thought; the sun had risen on the new life, and the new hopes were coming with it. He thought so standing there with its brightness on his face.

He rattled away merrily at the knocker.

"Agatha calls this my good-tempered knock," said he; "see with what a radiant countenance she will forestall that slavey of ours, and forget my interdict upon her answering the door. There was never such a girl to forget in the world!"

Mrs. Thirsk answered the door, but not

with that radiant countenance which he had prophesied, and I had even anticipated. On the contrary, with a scared white face that startled both of us, and with a trembling hand pressed to her bosom to still its agitation.

“Nicholas—Nicho—las!” she gasped.

“What’s the matter?” asked Thirsk;
“has anything happened?”

“N—no, dear, nothing has happened. Only you are here so suddenly; and you talked of being absent all the week.”

“To be sure I did, but fortune strikes in and upsets the wisest of schemes,” replied he; “and it’s good fortune this time, Agatha.”

“I am very glad!” she said, faintly.

“Are you not very glad to see an old friend too?” he asked.

“To be sure I am. Will you forgive my rudeness, Mr. Neider. But—but this is so very great a surprise!”

She led the way into the parlour, and

presently we three were seated, looking from one to the other.

"This is an odd kind of reception, Agatha," said Thirsk; "especially as there is nothing the matter, as you have been kind enough to inform me And you do not appear very anxious about my good news."

"Oh! yes, I am," said she; "it is so long a time since there has been any good news to communicate, that—that it is a surprise, dear, and takes time to prepare for."

"Well—it will keep. Let us have a light, Agatha—the evening is dark."

Agatha rang for the servant; the candle-lamp was ordered, and finally placed on the table. Thirsk kept his news to himself till everything was in fair order, and Agatha composed. He was not going to hurry matters, and burk good intelligence.

Once, before she sat down, he asked if the boy were asleep, and received an answer in the affirmative—still in tones that trembled very much.

"Why, what a baby you are!" cried Thirsk, good-naturedly; "as frightened at my appearance as if I were the demon of discontent, all black and red, like an imp in a pantomime. Courage, my girl, or you will never be able to hear this story of good fortune."

When she was sitting near him, he laid his hand upon her shoulder, in a gentle and affectionate manner so new to him that she coloured with pleasure, till the old fear smote her and turned her pale again.

"Now, are you ready?"

"Yes."

She glanced irresolutely from him to me, and then made an effort at attention.

"I have thrown up my engagement as special reporter, to accept that of private secretary, at a salary of five hundred pounds per annum. We shall give up this dark, benighted dust-hole for a place wherein we can draw breath and find a


pure atmosphere to draw. The new life, with that new leaf to be turned over which I have promised you so long ! ”

“ I shall be so happy ! ” she cried ; but her joy was not very visibly portrayed, and there was still embarrassment upon her features, and in her very attitude, which was restless and uneasy. Thirsk, in his own excitement, did not see this so readily as myself, who had come to watch—was to a certain extent behind the scenes, and could form a shrewd guess from what particular quarter this good fortune had been wafted to him.

Agatha Thirsk, I fancied, almost betrayed her prior acquaintance with the story, by feigning so little surprise at the tidings, and I began to fear that a dim suspicion of the truth would soon suggest itself to her husband.

“ I am so glad,” she repeated ; “ it will be so great a change for you and me.”

“ You do not realize it yet ? ”



"Scarcely, dear," she murmured.

"It will not be a town house in Bedford Square, and a host of servants at one's command; but I think it will be a happy little villa for you, and me, and baby—surely our happiest time is coming, with the better luck that has dropped to our feet."

"Oh, Nicholas!" said she, suddenly flinging herself into his arms; "it will be a happy time, indeed, if we are together a little more; if you will not think me quite entirely a child, and make me—just a little more—your companion and friend!"

"Never mind what I have thought you, *mon enfant*," he said; "does it matter what were the thoughts of a wild and despairing man—see, I puff them away to the shadows!"

"It will be happiness then."

"I must have a look at the boy—he always took to his father, you know, and made you jealous of my influence. If I had been more of a home-bird, I should

have stolen all his love away. Neider, come and look at the young one? ”

“You — you will wake him, Nicholas. Oh, Nicholas! — you — ”

“This has been too much of a shock to your nervous system, Agatha. If you would but learn to control yourself a little,” said he, with a petulant stamp of his foot.

She shrank away, like a cowed child. Trained in a hard school to learn the dark signs from his looks, she fell back to her place.

“Perhaps your ugly mug Neider would scare the young one,” said Thirsk, turning to me with a laugh; “but I’ll just have one look at him, like an amiable father, as I am—going to be! Agatha, touch the bell.”

The bell was rung, the servant appeared, and a light was ordered. Presently Nicholas Thirsk was leaving the room with a chamber candlestick in his hand. He looked at his wife again before he left us.

“Upon my honour, Agatha, you puzzle me.”

She did not answer, but I fancied that her hands clasped themselves tighter together, and her cheek took a shade more ghastly hue.

"Try and get a smile to that grim young lady's face, before I return," said he, with a laugh, as he left the room.

The door had scarcely closed before Agatha Thirsk had sprung to my side, and laid both hands upon my arm.

"Oh! tell me what to do?—oh! tell me what to do, sir?"

"What is it?—what has happened, Mrs. Thirsk? Good heavens!" I cried, as the thought suddenly suggested itself, "nothing has happened to the child?"

"No, no—God forbid!" she exclaimed; "but the—the child is not there!"

I regarded her with speechless amazement; the child gone, and the man whose nature was so excitable and ungovernable, on the verge of the discovery.

"What has become of the boy?" I gasped.

She wrung her hands, and for a moment made no answer. Suddenly, as his footsteps paused over head, she said—

“The boy is at my brother’s house at Welsdon in the Woods. Oh! what am I to do?—what am I to tell him?”

“I can but suggest the truth.”

“If he would only listen patiently, or allow me to explain,” she cried; “but the very name of my brother is so hateful to him!”

Nicholas Thirsk was heard descending the stairs. At every step that advanced nearer to the sitting-room I could see her face assume a more terrified expression. She went back to her seat by the table, and sat there with her large dark eyes turned towards the door. My own heart beat uncomfortably for the poor, timid woman who held her husband in such fear.

The door opened, and, with all the light and life quenched from his

dark face, Nicholas Thirsk re-entered.

"Agatha," said he, in a quick, sharp voice, "where is the boy?"

Her lips parted to reply, but no sound issued thence. Her vacillating gaze wandered in my direction. She had told me where he was; would I take her part, and explain to him where the boy had gone?

"Where is the boy?" he shouted; "*you* I ask, Agatha. Am I to have an answer or not?"

"At—at Richard's."

"Richard Freemantle's?" he cried.

"Yes—yes—he——"

"Stay, let me think of this. I must be dreaming, going mad, or something. Sir Richard Freemantle in possession of my child, and the mother sitting at home contented here. By God! I must be going mad!"

And he struck the table with his hand so violently that the table lamp clattered half across the table, and would have fallen had

he not instinctively stopped its further progress.

Agatha Thirsk had found her voice at last. She was standing at his side, explaining in a rapid, almost incoherent manner. She had put her hands upon his shoulder, but he had shaken them away—there was no love in his dark face then, and all signs of the new life that was coming to them both had vanished in a breath.

“He loves the boys so passionately, Nicholas dear,” she pleaded; “and he came here to see me, and make peace with us; he talked so much of the boy being his heir, when he should die childless, and alone in the great house at Welsdon.”

“He has been here more than once?”

“Yes—once or twice, and he has always taken to our boy—and the boy to him, young as he is, Nicholas. And he prayed so hard to let Mercy——”

“Mercy Ricksworth?”

“Yes.”

“Go on—go on—to let Mercy——”

“To let Mercy go back with him and the boy to the Hall for a few days, whilst you were absent and could not miss him. And he is his uncle, Nicholas dear; and if we will not be indebted to my brother for any advantages in this life, we should not neglect our duty to our child.”

“Hark at this poor weak fool talking of duty—she who forgets that to her husband every day, and mocks her marriage oath by a fool’s step like this. Agatha Thirsk, you have deceived me. You are like your brother, crafty and designing; you fight always in the dark, and are not what I thought you. Ever from to-day to be under suspicion, and know no trust and confidence from me.”

“Oh!—Nicholas, Nicholas!—you will not be so cruel!”

“Distrust for distrust, you woman with the baby’s brain! You child with no common sense—who never knew discretion in your

life, and are not to be expected, I suppose, to show it now. Only a woman in appearance, who has marred my life, clogged all my efforts, cursed me by inaction and lack of sympathy and moral force."

"A woman who has loved you all your life, and been your slave, and uttered no murmurs at your tyranny!" cried Agatha, with more spirit than I had anticipated—"who has a right to ask you to spare her the shame of this degradation before him you call your friend."

"Ha!—I had forgotten him," said he, with a quick glance towards me. "Neider, I am sorry you should remain here a witness to this little scene of domestic felicity. And you are dinnerless, too, and have ridden, like me, some eight or nine miles. Let us be moving."

"You—you will not leave me like this, Nicholas?"

"Pardon me, madam, but I have an appetite."

She went back to her chair by the table — the old strange mood, irreconcilable with everything, and therefore in its working impossible to guess at, had come over him. The hard, sarcastic, bitter mood, that took no impression, and spared no one.

“When will you be home?” she asked.

“I cannot say, Mrs. Thirsk—in a week, two, three — it depends upon circumstances.”

“Nicholas!” she pleaded.

“You will be pleased to write, or go, or send for my boy. You have taken the trouble to send him away, in defiance of my wishes; that his mind may be poisoned against me, as my father’s was in the old times—for no other motive that I can understand. When that boy is home again I will return.”

“I will go at once!” she cried.

“Upon second thoughts, I will write a letter to Sir Richard Freemantle,” said he; “you will keep to your home,

madam, or I will never enter it again. Don't look so alarmed, Mrs. Thirsk, it shall be as polite a note as my indignation will allow — I have nothing wherewith to reproach the baronet, and I have not been mistaken or treacherously deceived in *him*."

"Nicholas!" she pleaded again.

At every harsh allusion to the deceit practised against him, she winced as though a blow had struck her. And they were blows upon her heart, which had always beaten truly, despite that weakness at which he had recently scoffed.

"Of course, before I write, I shall take the trouble to convince myself of the truth of all these assertions," he said; "I must not look ridiculous in more eyes than my wife's and Mr. Neider's."

She flung her arms across the table, and buried her head in them and sobbed; but the man was of iron, and would *not* be moved.

“Mr. Neider, I am detaining you—I *will* keep you in this unpleasant position, it appears. This way.”

“I hope you are not going to leave Mrs. Thirsk like this.”

“Like what, sir?” he said, sharply.

“Can you not see?”

“Neider, my dear fellow, haven’t you heard of the old warning about non-interference between husband and wife,” he said —“it’s a bad plan to interfere in these little family jars.”

“Pardon me, I do not interfere,” I said; “but you talk of leaving your house, and your wife is left behind very weak, and in much tribulation——”

“Which she has brought on herself,” he cried, impatiently. “Are you coming, or shall I leave to you the task of consolation?”

“I am so much better by myself,” murmured Agatha.

We went out of the room together. As

he stood with his hand on the door-handle, Agatha faintly called his name.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Shall you be late to-night?"

"I shall not be back to-night. I have told you so," he answered, and a minute afterwards the door closed on us both.

We went along the paved square and through the posts to the livery-stable, where our horses awaited us. Thirsk flung himself into the saddle, dropped some money into the ostler's hand, and rode off uncereemoniously. I had some difficulty in overtaking him.

"Do you wish to shake me off, Thirsk?" I said, when I was level with him; "you have only to say so."

"I am hasty. No, I don't wish to get rid of you, though you take the part of my wife, who has acted like a fool and a traitor."

"Only like a woman, Thirsk, who has some natural love for a brother, and who

has suffered herself to be persuaded to give up her child for a day or two. In your absence, too, when you could spare him."

"Spare him!" he said, ironically; "you must think me a wonderful father if I couldn't spare him now and then. If I couldn't spare him for ever, for the matter of that."

"Do you mean it?" I said, sternly.

He hesitated. He was not a man to lie deliberately, and he had a father's love for the child.

"Well, I don't," he confessed; "why drive me so remorselessly into a corner, you *Tirante il Bianco*, squire of dames, and knight of Edmonton?"

"Because you are too stagy, and are not talking in a fair, every-day style."

"You think I am in the wrong?"

He reined in his horse and looked me in the face. I could see his nervous hand fidgeting uneasily with his whip.

"Partly."

"In my place you would have been naturally indignant at so paltry a trick."

"I should have been pained at the want of confidence, but I should have made every allowance for the peculiar position in which my wife had been placed."

"Letting in by stealth a man who has been forbidden the house."

"Her brother—her friend, companion, guardian from an early girlhood."

"My enemy!"

"A man who wishes you well."

"Then I am only partly in the wrong?"

"But you may be adopting the wrong method of showing your indignation."

"If you had said I had been in the wrong," said Thirsk, between his set teeth; "I should have cursed you and ridden away from you for ever. As to my method of showing my natural resentment at this trick, that is a matter of taste. I have my own idea as to the right move to check that confounded knave who

steals my own child away from me."

"You will do nothing rashly," said I, as we moved on again.

"Everything soberly, of course," said he, satirically; "I am a sober man, who has the upper hand of his passions, and says his prayers before making a false step. I wedded in haste, and in my leisure moments I can think of the wife's duplicity, and the judgment that has followed a *marriage de convenance*."

"May I ask what you think of doing?"

"I don't know," was the answer; "my first impulse was to proceed at once to the Hall, and bring my child away. But I have sworn never to cross the threshold of his home, and I might hold him too tightly by the throat, if he came within arm's length of me. I must think how I can most humiliate the dastard."

"A bad frame of mind," I said; "is this the same Nicholas Thirsk who came to my farm so full of good spirits this afternoon?"

“The blue devils have chased the good spirits away,” he replied, “and there is no fishing them up from the depths. I thought this afternoon that there was nothing in the world that could cast me back to my old self, little dreaming whence the blow would come to stagger me.”

“Not your old self, Thirsk ; not so bad as that !”

“I feel very much like my old self to-night,” he said, ruefully ; “it’s hard to find one’s own wife has no confidence, and lives in a world of her own.”

“Have you encouraged that confidence much ?”

“Eh ?”

And he turned in his saddle at the question I quietly put to him, and which I repeated to him after his interjection.

“Oh ! I have played Bluebeard and Boanerges, and all the tyrants ancient and modern, to be sure,” he said, with a sneer. “I have trampled upon her and heaped

reproaches on her head, and hurled curses at her, and thrown her out of window and jumped on her."

We rode on at a more rapid pace ; he did not wish to continue that conversation, and I had suggested a doubt, despite his irony, as to whether his conduct in the past had been conducive to much confidence. And he had ever played the tyrant, as she had played the slave !

I was glad when the horses had been stabled, and we were in a private room of an hotel near the Strand. After dinner I had a hope that Thirsk would be more reasonable and rational—that, with a little time to cool, he would become a different man. But I was disappointed. The more he brooded on his wrongs, the more his sullen nature seemed to deepen, and to resist all attempts at mediation. His hatred of Sir Richard Freemantle was so intense, and his sense of injury was based for once on grounds that were so valid, that

he took a secret satisfaction in considering his injuries.

“You don’t get over it, Thirsk,” I said.

“I shall never get over it, Neider,” he returned ; “the old fit is on me, and must last Five hundred a-year and a private secretaryship will do me no good, hampered as I shall be with a lying wife. How do I know that all this is not an evasion ; that, in her childish fear of offending me, she has not invented this specious tale to account for the boy’s absence ? To be with Sir Richard Freemantle appears to me so unnatural, and she sitting quietly at home—she, whose whole soul is wrapt up in that child.”

“Your return, though improbable, was not impossible, and her absence at the same time would have alarmed you.”

“Oh ! dreadfully,” he said, with a scornful laugh.

“Probably you interdicted her visits to the Hall ?”

"Ah! that is it!" he cried; "what a crafty evasion! And I did not interdict the child, and so the specious reasoner sends him off to Welsdon. And I did not interdict the baronet's visits to my house, because I never dreamt of such accursed audacity. Ring for the brandy!"

"No."

"Have I taken too much wine for you already?"

He had drunk liberally in his excitement, but not enough to intoxicate him. I suggested, in as mild a form as possible, that he had taken sufficient for his health, rather more than sufficient for that grave deliberation on his domestic affairs to which he had resolved to devote himself.

He laughed.

"Brandy postponed, *sine die*. And now," rising with a darkling face, "to business."

"What is the next step?"

"I am going to Ricksworth, to see if

Mercy be at home or not. Will you accompany me?"

"I hardly think I can trust you alone."

"Faithful follower!—or guardian angel—which is it?"

"A faithful follower, I hope."

"I will hope so too."

And the manner in which he stretched his hand across the table and shook my own, assured me that he *did* hope that, and that my remonstrance, in his favour and his wife's, had not left any bad impression.

"Do you know where these Ricksworths live, Thirsk?"

"Yes," he answered; "wasn't I in love with that excitable, passionate Mercy—a devoted girl, too?"

"You—you!"

"Wasn't she handsome enough?" he asked, defiantly; "and wasn't she the amiable go-between, and interested in the loves of the Thirsk and the Freemantles?"

When I woke up to the fall of my household gods—those that were to have been gilded by sixty-thousand pounds—did she not play the heroine, and offer to live and die for Agatha, and wake up in me the old fire which I had masked so long?”

“So long, Thirsk!” I repeated, sorrowfully.

“I told you once, you didn’t half know what a villain I was,” said he; “Mercy Ricksworth was in my thoughts at that time. I was mad for any excitement, folly, madness, and so I made love to her, and she cursed me, I think, or something of that kind, for my presumption. She made an excuse to leave my wife, and never crossed my path again—so much the better for us both! But she was a trump of a girl; for she kept my secret after—oh! Lord, such a lecture!—a lecture that even made me ashamed of myself.”

“Thirsk, Thirsk—and you rail at your wife, and see so many faults in her?”

"I can afford to rail, now I find her not immaculate. And I am in the mood to horrify you with my sombre stories. Don't I look dangerous?"

And to look at his defiant face was to answer in the affirmative.

"Are you ready?" he asked, after some moments' silence, during which I had thought of the strangeness of the story which he had so wantonly confessed. I had a hope that in his fierce moods he had exaggerated his confession—he was so anxious to paint himself in sombre colours. Stung by a disappointment, or a fancied injury, I had been more than once a witness to an extravagance of manner, and an eccentricity of conduct, that almost bordered on insanity. I would not judge him at his worst; I would not place credence in all he said or did in the rash moments when his mind was troubled.


He was a better man than he would have had me believe that night—but in his

nature there were faults and failings that, left to their own wild growth, would shipwreck twenty lives.

CHAPTER III.

THE RICKSWORTHS' HOME.

IN a maze of streets between Holborn and Lincoln's Inn Fields stood the particular street, or lane, or court, where the Ricksworths had chosen their London residence. A little house, admittance to which was suddenly down two steps into a cavernous passage, where people fell and stumbled and cursed and groped in darkness till some one made an appearance with a light. A street far from select, and the characters of whose habitants were doubtful—a street watched by the police and vigilant detectives, and wherein more fights occurred in one day



than in St. Giles's in a week. A street in which Ricksworth had already made himself famous by his quarrels with his neighbours, and one or two popular resistances to legal authority, which necessitated half-a-dozen policemen and a stretcher.

"A strange place for a heroine to draw breath in and grow strong," said Thirsk, as we entered the streets.

"A strange change for people who have been habituated to country life."

Thirsk did not appear to know the number of the house very well, and it was not till after an inquiry as to the whereabouts of the Ricksworths that we were falling, after the general rule, into the passage already mentioned.

A door opened on the left, and admitted a stream of light.

"Who's there?" growled an unmistakable voice.

"Friends!" I ventured to respond.

"That's a lie to begin with!" shouted back

Peter Ricksworth, and Peter himself appeared, to look into the facts of the case.

"Let's see the man who has the pluck to call himself my friend," said Ricksworth, putting the light close to my face, and then to Thirsk's.

The result of his scrutiny was a stare of amazement, succeeded by a hoarse laugh.

"If you're friends, we're in luck's way to-night," he said; "friends with money in their pockets are allus welcome here. This way, gen'lemen."

He led the way into a small, low-ceilinged room, damp, dark, and unwholesome, with the windows broken, and the wind rushing through the apertures unpleasantly, and guttering the one flickering dip on the deal table. Slung across the room near the ceiling were some lines adorned with a few fragments of linen, that had undergone the process of ablution at an earlier hour; and sitting at the table, working at a

pile of sailors' Guernsey shirts, was Mrs. Ricksworth, more waxen, angular, and grim than in even the past Welsdon days. In the corner of the room, asleep, or feigning to sleep, was a ragged being, whom I failed for the first moment or two to recognize, but who gradually impressed himself upon my mind as Ipps, the old, unfaithful servant of Follingay Farm. One glance assured us that Mercy Ricksworth was not there.

"Here's a seat welcome for one of you," said Ricksworth, roughly; "it'll bear you if you keep to the edge, and not whop down too suddenly—and ould Ipps has another. Hi! Ipps, you blundering sleepy devil, move your carcase, and make room for gentlefolks. Hi!" he shouted.

Ipps leaped up with some of his old alacrity, gave a groan at the pain his sudden movement had incurred, passed his hand over his eyes, as if to make sure our appearance there was not a dream, and with a downcast, sullen look, moved away from

the corner wherein he had ensconced himself.

“You’re allus in the way, you warmint,” commented Ricksworth, pushing the chair in our direction with his foot, which, thanks to his length of limb, had, in a very ingenious manner, hooked the chair half across the room.

“I can’t help it,” muttered Ipps.

“This is my adopted, gentlemen,” said he; “I takes care of him, and gives him a kind of lodging here. The board he manages to beg or steal for hisself—gen’rally steals, I think.”

“You’ll say anything, ould Ricksworth,” was the reply.

“Just hold your jaw, now; it wags a precious sight too much.”

Ipps took up his position in an opposite corner, with his back to the wall, and his hands crossed on the stick that supported him in that half upright position. Crouching there, with his small, piercing eyes

watching us, and never turning from us for an instant, in his dirt, and rags, and feebleness, and with that face of misery, he was a figure to scare one at that time. Ricksworth and his wife were pitiable objects enough, but in Ricksworth there seemed strength and life yet, and there was an energy in his wife that told of powers of resistance, and unflinching habits of industry. But in that feeble old man cowering there, there seemed bodily and mental prostration, utter abjectness and starvation. Thirsk glanced once towards him, and shuddered perceptibly at the sight of him. Did it strike him then that the figure was from his past, and reduced to dire extremity by *his* means?—did it suggest to him that he might stand answerable some day?

Mrs. Ricksworth plied her needle unceasingly; as we entered she had taken a cursory inspection of us through her glasses; but her time was valuable—talking

distracted her attention, and she did not feel called upon to enter into conversation. Until the Guernsey shirts were done, there was no chance of a meal, and she was a woman who worked hard when an order came in.

"I s'pose no one has been and left us a fortun'?" asked Ricksworth, as he took up his position with his back to the empty fire-grate.

"Not that I have heard of," said Thirsk drily, "I've come for a little information."

"I don't think we've much of that to give away."

"I can pay you, if it's necessary."

"Then we're open as the day—eh, missis?"

And he appealed to his wife, who muttered something in reply which no one comprehended.

"An ould gibbering cat as ever lived," growled Ricksworth; "I thought I had brought you to your senses last night."

"You knocked me down," said Mrs. Ricksworth, quietly; "and though I say it that shouldn't, you're a brute and a coward."

"Only when you rile me. And you'd rile the very devil sometimes. And when you say a word agin that girl of mine, down you'll go agin while I've strength in these 'ere pairs of fives."

And he held up his villainously dirty hands for public inspection.

"I said she was always leaving the house, and not helping me with an honest bit of needlework, and so she is. But I'm nobody—I never was."

"She's too good for you," said Ricksworth.

"Though I say it that shouldn't——"

"Stop, there!" shouted Ricksworth; "I woan't have it—I've said it all my life, and I woan't. If it wasn't for the supper you're arning to-night, I'd break your neck. Find fault with me as you ha' allus done, old

woman, but just be civil to her. It's my only bit of pride to hear her spoke well on."

"She's a good girl in her way," muttered the discontented woman, "but it's not the right way, or I don't know it."

"You don't know it, you fool!" was her husband's uncomplimentary rejoinder.

"She's not dutiful; she was spoilt by that Miss Freemantle—though I say it that shouldn't before the lady's husband."

"My good woman, my feelings are not wounded," said Thirsk, "and it is concerning your daughter that I wish to speak."

"Have *you* anything to say agin her, Master Thirsk?"

"A little perhaps."

"Doan't say it here then!" and the forbidding scowl of the father gave sufficient warning of the risk Thirsk ran. But Thirsk liked danger; it was an excitement for him, and the threat of this man appeared to rouse him.

"What I have to say, I shall relate in

my own way and manner, fellow," said he haughtily.

"This is a poor house, but it's mine, remember."

"I will remember that."

"And don't rile me in it, Mr. Thirsk."

"Where's your daughter, man?"

"Is this the information you talked about paying for, now?"

"Yes—there's the fee."

He spun a crown piece towards Ricks-worth, whose quick hand caught it and consigned it to his trowsers pocket before the eyes of his wife had taken stock of the amount. And she had looked round very quickly too.

"My darter's gone in the country, for the benefit of her health."

"With my child, to Sir Richard Freemantle's?"

"You seem to know all about it, without my telling you," he said, with a stare of surprise.

"Am I correct?"

"You are."

"When is she likely to return?"

"In three or four days, and I with piles of work enough to break my heart, here," said the woman at the table.

"So far, so true," said Thirsk to me; "have we anything to stop for now?"

"I am not aware of anything."

"Has she been too sharp for you, Mr. Thirsk?" asked Ricksworth, with a hideous grin, that showed two formidable rows of tusks.

"She has taken my child to my bitterest enemy!—this paragon of excellence of yours!"

"What! do you owe my gentleman a grudge too?"

"I would give a thousand pounds to hear he was dead!" cried Thirsk, with his old impetuosity. All allusion to the baronet appeared to throw him off his guard, and bring on his past extravagance.

"Say that again in cold blood, now, if you bean't afraid," said Ricksworth.

"I'm afraid of nothing."

"And you'd give a thousand pounds to hear he was dead, now?"

"Yes," cried Thirsk; "wouldn't it be worth a thousand pounds to be rid of my enemy, Neider," said he, turning to me with his scornful laugh, "to have no one to hiss in the ears of my child and my wife all the slanders against me that malevolence can suggest? Hasn't he been the shadow on my path for many years?"

"Ah! and isn't he in the way of a fine fortune that would fall to your share, if anything should *unfortunat'ly* happen to him. You could stand a thousand pounds out of so fat an estate, Master Thirsk?"

"Ay, and my blessing into the bargain."

"It's a good joke!" said Ricksworth, whose eyes would have been very appropriate in the head of a wild beast, "and you were allus fond of jokes."

"Fool! do you think I should grieve to hear he was dead?"

"You're joking, I tell you."

"I am in the humour for jesting," said Thirsk.

"Say it's arnest!" cried Ricksworth, eagerly.

"Stern, sober, real earnest," was the bitter reply.

"Thirsk, Thirsk, do you know what you are saying?" I remonstrated.

"It will reach his ears, and let him know my opinion of him better than I can write it," said he; "wherever I go from this time, I will proclaim my hatred and horror of that man. I will have no mercy on him, if he be ever in my power. I will hate him all my life, and bide my time to pay the debt I owe him."

"Let us go home," I urged.

"That's a raal, honest hate, Mr. Thirsk," observed Ricksworth.

"He's a thief, who has robbed me of my

child, and your daughter aids and abets him and my wife!" cried Thirsk, beside himself; "by God, Neider, I am going mad over my wrongs!"

"You're playing the fool, Thirsk," I said bluntly.

"That's a matter of opinion. I have a reason for speaking my mind out here," he said.

"I see," muttered Ricksworth.

"Mercy will hear of this," said he to me, "and so the news will spread and sting the viper. I am ready now, Neider."

"Ha' you done with the chair?" asked Ricksworth, as Thirsk rose.

"Yes."

Ricksworth stretched out his thin leg, and hooked his feet in the cross rail beneath, and drew the chair towards him after the old fashion. Dropping into it, he planted his elbows on his knees, and took his head between his hard knotted hands, and set to studying the fireless grate before him.

"That means mischief," said Mrs. Ricksworth ; "you've been putting the devil's thoughts into his head, sir."

"What's that to me?"

"And he's half a madman, and always has been. You're a fine gentleman mayhap, but you're a bad un, sir."

"That's my character," Thirsk said, defiantly ; "I am a bad one, Mrs. Ricksworth. You're only of the same opinion as the world."

"Ye were talking of your wrongs jist now," said a sharp voice, and the figure in the corner spoke for the first time.

"Don't you think I have any, Ipps?"

"Do ye ever think of moine, Measter Thirsk?" he said, suddenly coming from the corner in which he had been so long located ; "ha' ye ever a thought for others' troobles beside those brought on ye by your gallows wickedness? Ain't I a roight to talk of wrongs, do ye think, ye cursed coward, who brought me doon to ruin?"

Thirsk recoiled. The passion of this feeble, tottering man was unlooked for, and the man spoke with a rapidity and force for which everyone there was unprepared. Mrs. Ricksworth dropped her needle, and her husband revolved slowly on his chair, and stared at the speaker.

“I’ll have my say out now, Measter Thirsk. God’s sent me the chance, and it’s the last one for an ould mon loike me, and I’m not afeard o’ ye. I wor honest all my loife before I knew ye—light-hearted for my age, and vain of my sharp wits, too. Ye knew I wor poor, and bribed me with your money, and told me a fool’s story of your love affairs, and turned me by degrees agin the honest measter whose farm had been my home for thirty-seven year and more. Ye made me false in my old age!—ye tempted me by promises of a better place, and of a pension when I wor too old for work!—ye told me a score of lies to make a knave of me, and ye succeeded!

— I'm a beggar now, and starving! Look at your work, sir!—aren't ye glad to see it? ”

Thirsk's hand wandered to his pocket, but the old man gave a scream of rage that arrested the movement:—

“ Hould there, ye mon ! ” he shrieked ; “ I woan't ha' your money—I woan't in any way or shape be holden to a man I'm going to curse ! Ye talk of hate—if ye only knew how I hate ye, and see in ye my ruin. And may ye live to be the ruin that ye've made of me—and may ye'r woife prove false to all her marriage vows—and your child die suddenly—and sickness and disease fall on ye and yourn—and shame and harm never leave ye till your dying day ! If it's a curse that cooms true every word, I'll thank my God for't ! ”

Thirsk could not stand against the torrent of accusation which escaped the old man's lips ; it was the first time in his life that he had been fairly charged with evil,

and the evil stood before him in all its haggardness and horror. He saw then, at that moment, where one step from right had led, and he knew whose work it was before him. In the old days he had rejoiced in the tact and judgment that had led this man to betray his master—in the craft that had gained the mastery over Ipps's simple shrewdness. And this was the result, and that old man's poverty and disgrace were his work.

"I never meant you harm," he stammered; "Neider, let us get out of this. They're all mad together."

No answer was returned. Ipps was struggling for breath; Ricksworth had faced the grate again, and was still deep in thought; Mrs. Ricksworth, brought to an idea of duty, was working diligently, and not affected much by the ravings of the half-demented being in the corner.

It was striking eleven when we were in the streets.

"Are you going home, Thirsk?"

"No."

"I would think it over again."

"I'll think no more to-night," he said, petulantly; "let me shake off the accursed weight that is on my brain for a while."

"I am silent."

"Do you return to Edmonton?"

"Not unless you will have no more of my society."

"Oh! your society will do for once," he said, with a forced laugh; "keep with me till the morning comes."

"Yes—and till the better thoughts come with the morning."

We went back to the hotel, discoursing of topics foreign to that which had brought us there together. He shunned any comment on the past incidents of the night; spoke of the theatres, literature, anything that might offer a change to that subject which had disturbed him. But amidst it all, and amidst his efforts to forget, I was

assured the deserted wife kept foremost rank, and would not be talked away — and the shadow of the old man's curse seemed hanging over him.

CHAPTER IV.

WARNING.

It was one o'clock when I was in my own room at the hotel; the clocks of two churches in the neighbourhood struck the hour as I extinguished my light, and a noisy guttural time-piece on the stairs boomed it in my ears three minutes behind time. I did not fall asleep directly; the incidents of that day had been varied; I had been an unwilling listener to much family strife; I had seen the rapidity with which Nicholas Thirsk could pass from the height of joy to the extravagance of hate. I had borne his hard words, for the sake of a chance of

reasoning with him when the first paroxysm was over; I had striven to do my best, and the result, so far as I could see it, was vain and unprofitable. When I fell asleep at last, I was conscious that the wind was blowing vigorously, and rattling my casement; and the rattle, rattle of the window in the sash mingled with a nightmare kind of dream, wherein all the figures of the day met confusedly, and made my head ache watching them. A distorted, oppressive dream, that we all suffer from at times, and to which I lay there a martyr, with the window rattling amidst it all, and I conscious of the noise it made, and anxious about it in my sleep.

The noise increased so much, that I struggled from dream-land, and sat up in bed to listen, and became aware that some one without was hammering upon the panels of the door.

“Who’s there?” I cried.

“The night-porter, sir.”

"What is it?—what do you want?"

"If you please is your name Snider, or Spider, sir?"

"Neider—do you mean?"

"That's it, sir. A young gentleman from a farm?"

"Well—well."

"Some one wants to see you below, sir. He says it's a matter of life and death, and you must come down."

"What name?"

"He didn't give a name. He's an old ragged man, sir."

"I'll be down in a minute."

My first thought was of danger at home; my second suggested Ipps as the messenger who had called at so unseasonable an hour. In any case, there was danger abroad, to bring a message at that time, and I dressed hastily in the dark. Such nights of sudden waking leave ever a vivid impression on those waked — every minor incident of the next few minutes remains

with me to this day. I remember groping for a box of wax lights I had seen on the dressing-table, and knocking over a little toilet bottle that was there, and finding everything *but* the lucifers. Distinctly visible still is that shadowy room, with the blurred light behind the window-blind, and the reflection of a street-lamp cast on the ceiling, and the outline of my coat hanging behind the door. And amidst it all, as in my dreams, is the rattle, rattle of that disjointed window, and swoops by in fitful gusts the angry wind without.

I went downstairs into the hall, where the lamp was shimmering, and the night-porter satcoiled in a capacious leathern chair, and Ipps stood on the hall-mat, twisting his hat round in his hands.

“ Well, Ipps, what is it ? ”

“ Coom into the street, sir—I’d rather not talk here.”

The porter rose, opened the door, and

closed it behind us, as we went down the steps into the deserted streets. The clocks struck two as I descended. I fancied until then that I had slept half the night through.

"If ye value human loife, ye'll be stirring now, sir. Peter Ricksworth's gone down to Welsdon in the Woods."

"What?—already?"

"You may well say already, sir. So it be."

"How do you know this?"

"He went out soon after ye, sir—when his woife had gone to take them flannel things home to the outfitter's, and I pretended sleep till he wor gone, and then went out and watched him. He had been very thoughtful after ye left, and, ould as I was, I guessed his thoughts. I ain't lost all my wits yet," he said, a little conceitedly.

"Go on—go on."

"He went to a public-house he knows about here—a rare gang of thieves meet

there, I can tell ye, and he's one of 'em—and he borrowed some money on some excuse or other that satisfied the landlord, for it was passed to him across the bar—a shilling and some ha'pence. That and your crown paid the fare to Welsdon in the Woods by the late train that started at midnight. I heard him ask for a ticket to Welsdon, and I saw him get into the train."

"Why didn't you come at once to me?"

"I ha' been hanging about this place ever since—I ha' been watching ye and that man who's been my ruin, through the wire-blind of the room where ye were sitting—the room next to the street-door. I worn't going to tell ye before one who's in the plot."

"What do you mean, Ipps?"

"He's offered a thousand pounds for the loife of a man, and Peter Ricksworth's gone to take it!"

"Ipps, you are crazy."

"Didn't I hear him—didn't you hear him?"

"It was bravado—the incoherency of passion—there was no harm intended."

"There will be harm doon—mark my words."

"This is madness!" I exclaimed.

"I doan't care what it be—mad or not mad, it worn't difficult to guess Ricksworth's meaning, or read all that he was thinking about in his eyes. He's a pal now, and I wouldn't ha' turned agin him, only he meant such awful mischief!"

"And he has gone to Welsdon by the last train?"

"I saw him with my own eyes," said Ipps; "and ye'll ha' to be quick, for he's a man that doan't lose easily a chance. He builds on a thousand poonds from the fortune that would coom to Thirsk, and he coonts on payment. There'll be something awful happen—soide by soide with the

chance of being rich is the long grudge owing to Sir Richard. He's as full of hate as the man ye were with two or three hours ago; it's all marked out and built on in both their brains, however much ye may think to blind me by laughing at my nervousness."

"I'm not laughing."

"You see they both meant it now?" he said eagerly.

"No, no."

"Do you tell me he didn't mean it too?" pointing to the hotel; "or that he'd care much for a loife that stood between him and his riches? You doan't know your friend so well as I do, arter all."

"You are mistaken in him, Ipps."

"Ha' your own way, sir," said the man, contemptuously; "only doan't say I've coom here for nothing."

"Let me think this over."

"Sartinly."

He walked on by my side, turned and

retraced his steps with me, while I tried to frame into some degree of consistency the startling information brought me by this man. I thought over the meeting at Ricksworth's house—the strange intensity of hate with which Thirsk had spoken in his excitement, and the effect it might have on the benighted mind of the ruffian who had defied the law for many years, and was poor, easily tempted, daring and vindictive. He might possibly have thought that Thirsk would give the thousand pounds for the tidings of the baronet's death, sketched some hasty scheme of crime out, and departed to carry out that scheme with all the craftiness with which his low mind was capable. There was a wild improbability about it all—a leaf from a romance of crime and human malice—but it was just possible! The wife had spoken of the devil's thoughts besetting him; and the strange fit of brooding into which Ricksworth had fallen had

begun before our departure from his wretched home.

It was not a long journey to Welsdon in the Woods ; I could proceed thither by the first train. It was not probable that the opportunity to work mischief would present itself immediately on the arrival of Ricksworth in his native village, presupposing that he were even actuated by the motives with which Ipps charged him. Telegraphing to Welsdon seemed a little too hasty, even had there been telegraph clerks up all night at country stations, which there never has been. There was no proof that any harm was intended ; in my own opinion, I doubted extremely Ipps's suspicions ; whilst to place Ricksworth under arrest, or set a watch upon him, was neither fair nor just. In my own experience, it had not been the first time that Peter Ricksworth had unceremoniously quitted his home, and left his wife to the tender mercies of the parish, or to the strength of her own resources to

keep her from the union ; in a former case he had abandoned her, under similar circumstances, when the daughter for whom he appeared to have some affection was absent from her home. It was more likely that the five-shilling piece which Thirsk had given him had suggested the means of reaching Welsdon with a trifling loan ; and having been fortunate enough to obtain that loan, he had started off at once. Still, I would go to Welsdon by the next train. I assured Ipsps of my intention.

“ I ain’t so bad as to let this go on, bad as *he’s* made me,” grumbled the old man ; “ p’raps this’ll be a kind of a set-off agin my ould tricks, if ye’re the means of stopping this, or putting Sir Richard on his guard.”

“ Still, Ipsps, I think you are over-suspicious.”

“ You don’t know Peter as well as I do. He be half a brute and half a madman, his woife says, and she knows all aboot him.”

"Does she know of this?"

"Not yet."

"Have you anything more to tell me?"

"Nothing—save that I haven't a penny in the world, and haven't tasted food for twenty hours. They let me coom out of the wet and cold now and then, when they're good-tempered, but devil a bit of anything to eat I get, even when they have it to spare, unless the gal's at home."

I gave him some money, for which he thanked me. He walked by my side to the door of the hotel, and then touched my arm again with his nervous hand.

"Ye will remember that there's loife at stake?" he said.

"I will do my best to avert all harm, if harm be intended."

"Ye doan't believe me?"

"Not yet."

"Ye'll tell that Thirsk?"

"I'll act for the best."

"Good night, and thankee for the money. I say."

"Well?"

"What did *he* think of my curse; warn't it all hot enough, and scorching—and woan't it fall on him, if he lives long enough?" he said, maliciously.

"I hope not."

"He desarves it all!"

And with this unfriendly remark, the man who had been so solicitous concerning human life, shuffled away and left me to proceed to Thirsk's room adjoining mine.

Previous to repairing there, I set the porter to find me a Bradshaw's Guide, which, having been procured, I studied under the hall lamp, until I had ascertained that a train as early 'as 5.30. A.M. left Euston Square for Welsdon.

I could afford to give Thirsk two hours more sleep before disturbing him, and I went back to my room, and flung myself

on the bed, to wait the time for further action. I had left word with the porter to call me at four, if, by chance, I should drop off to sleep again; but the news had been too startling to afford me much composure—and to lie there brooding on it, seemed gradually, but powerfully, to lead me to Ipps's way of thinking.

I tried to shake it off with all my power. I went over and over again my old train of reasoning, that rendered Ricksworth's departure natural; but the doubts gathered strength, and before four o'clock I was impatient to be gone.

I had some difficulty in rousing Thirsk, whose dark countenance finally glowered at me from his half-open door.

"What's the matter with you, you sleep robber?" he cried; "have you stolen some of my past restlessness?"

"I am going now."

"The deuce you are! Well, you might have left your adieux in a note. Come in."

To my surprise he was completely dressed.

"Haven't you been to bed, Thirsk?"

"I fell asleep thinking about it. Don't look alarmed—that's an old habit of mine."

"I am going to Welsdon in the Woods."

"You?"

"Yes—to see after Peter Ricksworth, who left by the last train yesternight."

"Ha!—who told you this?"

"Ipps knocked me up at two in the morning with the news."

Thirsk looked uneasy. He ran his fingers once or twice through his tangled black hair, and kept his eyes directed upon me. Ipps's suspicion had evidently suggested itself to him, though his effort, like my own, was to think it down.

"Being knocked up makes a man nervous," said he, with a forced laugh; "what had Ipps to say?"

I told him, and he listened for once with a strange amount of attention.

"It is odd!" he muttered; "I don't see

the way clear. If it had been any one but Ricksworth, I could laugh at it more. Of course it's all folly!"

"Will you come to Welsdon with me?"

"Not I. Say the worst happens, what then?"

"Thirsk, you don't wish it to happen. If you say as much, I will never call you friend again."

"What a calamity!" he said, ironically.

"Do you wish it?"

"Well, not in quite so unceremonious a fashion, Neider; and if it be intended—which, the more I think of—or the more I wake up—the more I doubt, why, you'll be doing a good turn by warning Sir Richard, or keeping an eye on Peter Ricksworth. Besides, you serve me as well."

"In what manner?"

"You can bring my boy back, or see that Mercy leaves with the boy at once. I'll write you a line to Sir Richard—your commission!"

"It's a commission I don't care to accept."

"Mr. and Mrs. Thirsk will remain at daggers-drawn until that boy's return. He is the peace-maker."

"Write your note, Thirsk."

There were writing materials on the dressing-table where the night-light burned, and he had been writing before sleep had stolen on him. He sat down before the table and dashed off a few hasty lines; and I, waiting and watching, could see how the brow contracted as he wrote. In a very little while the letter was sealed and in my hand.

"This by a trusty messenger—as the ancient letter-writers used to say," he said.

"I hope you have been civil, at least, Thirsk?" said I, doubtfully.

"Don't be alarmed," was the evasive answer; "and, secondly, don't lose your train."

"Thirsk, you are anxious I should be gone," I said.

"If you did not scent danger yourself, would *you* go?" he retorted.

"I hardly believe in danger."

"Nor I—only, once upon a time, in the wild days of my youth, when I was a fool to my interest, I promised Ricksworth five pounds, or rather hinted at five pounds for a service required, and he earned it."

"Thirsk, there *is* danger!"

"I have made up my mind *not* to believe it. Good-bye. I shall remain at this hotel until I hear from you."

He shook me by the hand before I left him. When we met again there were many changes.

CHAPTER V.

“MY LADY’S CHAMBER.”

I HAD half an hour to wait at the Railway Station. It was a fine bright morning, with the wind, that had kept me wakeful and disturbed my dreams, blowing fresh from the north-east. A luggage train that had been travelling all night having just arrived, I had a perfect consciousness of being very much in the way. After consulting the timetable, to make sure that 5.30 was the correct time, and wandering round the ticket holes—all closed, and breathing no sign of business—I went into the waiting-room, which a sleepy guard was sweeping out.

I wrote off a letter to my mother, telling her that sudden business had called me to Welsdon in the Woods, and desiring her and Grey not to be anxious concerning me. It was an epistle that occupied ten minutes, at the end of which time one or two early travellers strolled into the waiting-room. Another five minutes woke up the officials, brought the passenger train backing into the station, piled the first instalment of luggage on the platform, opened the ticket holes, and filled the terminus with people. Having posted my letter, and procured my ticket, I took my seat in the railway carriage, with a strange uneasiness that I had been dilatory in my movements, and that much valuable time was lost to me. All the old reasons that warned me of precipitation, and acting on my own responsibility, appeared weak at that time, and I was feverishly impatient for the train's departure. I sat by the open door, glancing up at the clock until 5.30

was registered on the dial. I beat uneasily on the floor with my feet when one minute, then another, stole on, and the guards only slammed doors, and opened them again, and luggage and late passengers were still upon the platform.

The train was only four minutes late, but it seemed an age to me before the whistle sounded, and we began to glide away from the eternal book-stall, and the staring clock, and the army of railway guards waiting for further trains. I was travelling second class, and there faced me a garrulous old gentleman, whose talk of the politics of the day—of Palmerston *v.* Derby, of Gladstone *v.* Disraeli—brought others besides myself to the verge of desperation. In my own excited condition I could have strangled him for his wearisome platitudes; for his deliberate appropriation of old newspaper articles that I had read, and which he delivered as ideas of his own, conceived that very instant in the heat of debate.

I was glad when my courteous neighbour offered me the "Punch" for the week, although its caricatures and pleasant sarcasms jarred upon me, and had no meaning. I remember reading one paragraph half-a-dozen times, and knowing little of its purport, and trying to guess at it in an imbecile kind of way, that irritated me. Every mile nearer my journey's end I became more excited, even more convinced that it was an errand of life and death on which I was speeding.

I was on a special errand, the result of Ipps's fears and suspicions; and once fairly launched on that mission, the whole story shaped itself differently to that which I had endeavoured to frame some hours before. *My* reasons for Ricksworth's sudden departure were probable then, and avarice and malice seemed the only incentives that could have urged Mercy's father to act so precipitately. If I had telegraphed down the line before my departure that morning

—if I had, at least, put Sir Richard Freemantle on his guard, and not have had such confidence in my own shallow judgment. It had been my reigning fault through life, that self-conviction—and I accused myself of want of energy in not making some effort to counteract the evil which Peter Ricksworth had in view.

When I sprung on the platform of Welsdon station I looked eagerly from one to another, as if to learn from the strange faces near me, whether there were any stirring news at Welsdon. But they were phlegmatic, every-day faces round me; the porter lounged to and fro, after the usual fashion of porters at small stations—the man who took my ticket was winking at a brazen-faced hussy in the rear—the man on the box of the fly that plied for hire was flipping the ears of his bony quadruped with his whip—country boys were lounging about, and looking through the open work fence which separated the high

road from the line—there was no excitement at Welsdon in the Woods.

“Fly, your honour?”

I climbed to the driver's side, a little to his amazement.

“Drive to the Hall.”

The man touched his hat, and then flipped more briskly at his horse, which went off at the jumping, jottling rate of progression peculiar to fly-horses in general.

My driver was a man whom I remembered as an ostler at the Haycock Inn, and a glance or two askance from his left eye assured me that he had recognized an old farm-pupil of Mr. Genny's.

“You're from the ‘Haycock’?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I suppose you remember me?”

“Never forgets, sir.”

“Times have changed since I was here last.”

“They have, sir—all along of the Tram-lingford smash, you see.”

"Any news?"

"No, sir. Things just as usual."

This was a relief to me—ten years must have been taken off my looks, the man stared so.

"I think you meet every train that comes in?"

"That's my dooty, sir. It's a poor spec, but missus likes the idea, and p'raps it keeps off opposition."

"Were you here last night?"

"O' course, sir."

"Any friends up by the last train? Old friends of Mr. Genny, or old acquaintances of yours?"

"No, sir—not that I remembers."

"Not Peter Ricksworth?"

"Oh l—oh l—old Peter, well, to be sure, now you speak of it, he did turn up, for I caught a sight of him coming out o' the station. That's curious that you should think of him, sir."

"I want him—where is he?"

" "I can't say. It's more curious like he hasn't been to the 'Haycock' this morning, or that I ain't seen him about the village. Now I think of it, it's odd nobody's seen him."

"How do you know he has not been seen?"

"Oh! they'd soon talk of Peter coming back. We were uncommon thankful when he went to London—he were such a spiteful, artful, disagreeable customer."

"Stop at the 'Haycock' as you pass through the village."

"All right, sir."

At the "Haycock" I alighted, made further inquiries of the landlady, and some men lounging at the bar, and learned that nothing had been heard of Ricksworth. Had it not been for the further testimony of the driver—who was snapped at by the landlady for not mentioning it before—my statement that Ricksworth had arrived at Welsdon would have been totally discredited.

"Oh! dear," sighed the landlady, "I

wonder if he thinks of stopping here. Jane," to her daughter, "take the new pewter pots out of the tap-room, and put the china ones back, or he'll come in quarrelsome, and kill somebody."

No particulars of Ricksworth in the village, and his sudden disappearance keeping alive my doubts of his intentions, I entered the fly, to deliberate on some careful plan of action. I could think better inside, and the driver could not trouble me with his loquacity.

We rattled on to the Hall, along the well-known road where Harriet and I had walked together more than once, and where my love once leaped to my lips and startled her; past the stile and the winding footpath across the meadow that led to the old church; along the curve by the woodside and shadowed by the overhanging trees, amidst which a man could hide and bide a time for his revenge, I thought. Then the old farm, let to another tenant, with

strange faces at the door, and strange workers in the fields, but looking so like home, that my heart yearned to the place, and tears came suddenly and strangely to my eyes. I began life there—romance began there—all the fevered dreams that ran out and left me in the waking world began there, and, but for one wild snatch at the past, ended there for ever. And dreams will end, and fancies born of folly must die suddenly—I was no worse off than other men! I had grown strong; my life was marked out with my bachelor partner—the world was a matter of profit and loss, good bargains and fair interest on one's little savings. I was growing old and stout, and there were early lines upon my forehead. My mother had found a grey hair in my head only two days since, and laughed and cried over it—so the globe spins round, and we grow old upon it in a little while!

The Hall at last. The quaint old-fashioned red brick mansion, which had

formed, for two hundred years, part of the Welsdon landscape ; we drove past the great iron gates and along the winding drive of that great house I had never thought of visiting till that day.

The lodge-keeper had swung back the gates ; to my inquiry through the window of the fly, if Sir Richard were within, he had answered that he thought so—Sir Richard might be wandering about the estate, perhaps, but he had not gone through the entrance-gates that day. I rode before the house, where further information was imparted to me.

“ Sir Richard’s not in, sir ; will you step in and wait ? He will be back by nine o’clock to breakfast.”

“ Where has he gone ? ”

“ Over to the ruins, sir. He’s sketching.”

“ He’s what ? ”

“ Sketching the ruins, sir, I think.”

“ I will go at once. The ruins of the castle, of course, you mean ? ”

"Yes, sir."

"Should I be unfortunate enough to miss him, will you present my card and ask him to wait within until my return, if you please?"

"Yes, sir."

I was turning away, when a thought occurred to me.

"Sir Richard's little nephew—is he here?"

"Is staying here, sir, with his maid. They both went across the park half an hour ago. There's a short cut through the park to the ruins, sir, if you wish to meet Sir Richard. He will be sure to come home that way."

"Thank you, I will avail myself of your directions."

I paid the driver of the fly, and dismissed him. The old seneschal—they seemed all of an ancient order, to match the house—came a little way with me across a footpath in the park, to indicate

the short cut to the ruins, leaving meanwhile the oaken door open. There was little fear of thieves at Welsdon in the Woods.

The path seemed easy to follow, but I managed to lose my way, and luckily to strike on it again after five minutes' loss of time. Every little impediment tried my temper and tested my nerves to an incredible degree; the sense of danger was strong upon me, and the consciousness that time was valuable, and on a moment's loss thereof might hang a human life, grew more powerful every instant.

The path through the Park, where the deer scudded by me, was circuitous, and seemed to have no end. The impression was gaining upon me that I had lost my way again when I came to the oaken fence that encompassed the Freemantle estate, and to a small wicket, with the key left in the lock. Passing through I found myself in meadow land, with the old ruins

before me on the slope, looking very picturesque, backed by the clear sky and the bright sunshine. There were a myriad of birds twittering amongst the trees around me, the cattle studded the meadows, the hum of insects rose up from the grass whereon the dew hung thickly. God's peace seemed resting over everything; and to think of evil at that time, in that quiet place, and at that hour, was akin to profanation.

My way to the ruins lay across the meadow and along the eastern side of the castle to the great entrance. In the walls were gaps and fissures, through which I might have forced a way, but respect for its proprietor within induced me to go round to the gates through which I had passed years ago with William Grey. In that old place time seemed to have stood still; two years more or less to the ivy-covered stonework made no difference here; only to the fresh and new, with the bloom

of life's spring upon them, were days and hours of moment.

There was a second old man officiating as custodian of the ruins ; Mercy Ricksworth's place had never been filled by one of her own sex. He looked with surprise at my early visit, but admitted me, and pointed to the book rest, and the visitors' book.

"Where is Sir Richard? I wish to speak to him immediately."

"Oh! I didn't know you'd come on business, sir," he said; "he's in 'My Lady's Chamber' yon——no, Lor' bless me, here he is!"

Sir Richard Freemantle came hastily towards me. He held his hand extended, as if to greet me with an old friend's warmth. His cold hand shook a little in my own, I fancied.

"Have you come from Mr. Thirsk or Agatha?"

"Partly from Mr. Thirsk."

"He knows his child is here?"

"Yes."

"What does he say?—what does he think now?"

"He is naturally surprised and indignant. The result has been a quarrel between husband and wife."

"Always unfortunate!" said the baronet, with a sigh; "but—but he was engaged to report some races, I understood?"

"He flung the appointment up, on the receipt of some good news from his father."

"And went home?"

"Yes."

"It is very hard," said Sir Richard, "that one cannot count upon his movements better; that he will be so eccentric! And that boy is such a comfort to me, young as he is. I have an artist at the Hall engaged to take his portrait."

"It must remain unfinished, Sir Richard."

"Ah!" with a second sigh, "I feared as much. And the child takes so kindly to a

stern man like me, and is so like the Freemantles, people tell me. There he goes, now. See there !” he cried with an enthusiasm I had never seen exhibited before. “How the little chap can trot !”

The baronet’s eyes sparkled behind his glasses, and he gave a sudden flourish of the walking cane in his hand, that narrowly escaped grazing my cheek in his excitement. Thirsk’s child, a well-made, sturdy little infant, that could just run alone now, and was proud of the achievement, passed the further end of the ruins, and trotted into the inner square of stone work, known in the old days as “My Lady’s Chamber ;” at the same moment Mercy Ricksworth darted across the grass in chase of him. The child and the maid were both laughing, and their silvery voices rang pleasantly amidst the walls which echoed so seldom to any human merriment.

“I’ll be with you in one moment, Mr. Neider,” said the baronet. And he took a

cross cut to the ruins, and ran on with surprising alacrity to intercept his nephew at the other end of the "Lady's Chamber." His blood had warmed since I had seen him last—in the latter days his heart was growing young. I watched him tripping gingerly yet swiftly along, with that burlesque of haste characteristic of methodical gentlemen of his age—for the moment I had forgotten the warning which I had travelled many miles to give him. In the light and sunshine he was safe, and I smiled at my own impulse that had called out his name. As he passed through a jagged archway, and his voice rang out in exultation at having surprised the child, whose little laugh echoed once more in concert, I looked up at the gaping stone-work above them, and the old staircase that ended abruptly in ruin and rank grass. The story of Grey's recurred to me: the old sense of danger came fresh upon me thinking of it; the passage choked with leaves that led up to

that tottering fabric was within a stone's throw, and I ran on to join the group.

I stopped suddenly and gasped for breath—a noise of falling masonry, and then the whole place swam round with me; ivied ruin, earth and sky, blended confusedly, and whirled before me. Was it fancy or truth, or had half the staircase fallen as I gazed, pushed from within by two strong bony hands, that at that distance I could have sworn to?

It was an awful reality, and I cried out with horror. The grass-covered stones at the summit had fallen—there were two steps less jutting from the stonework; there was a cloud of dust from the “Lady's Chamber,” a shout from Sir Richard, and then a laboured groaning, as of one suddenly in pain. Breaking the spell that had locked my feet to the earth, I ran on—Mercy and the child had fallen, and there was blood upon the ground! The child was still, and it was Mercy groaning beneath the weight

upon her chest; whilst standing paralyzed with fear, and wringing his hands like a woman, stood Sir Richard Freemantle unhurt.

“My God!—this is an awful accident, Neider—thank heaven, you are here to assist.”

“This is no accident, Sir Richard—it is *murder*!”

CHAPTER VI.

"GOD DISPOSES."

I HAD uttered the words as I stooped over Mercy Ricksworth, and made an effort to raise the great stone step that had struck her down, and the word "*murder*" was caught up in a key harsh, dissonant, and awful, from the ruined staircase whence the fall had come. A moment afterwards, and Peter Ricksworth, glaring like a wild beast at all that he had been the agent of, dropped from the height above, brought more stones crashing down with him, fell, staggered to his feet, to fall

again on his knees before his murdered child.

“Oh! Mercy, Mercy!—not you, my girl—not you of all the world, after all these years! Man, won’t you help me take the load from her?” he shrieked.

“See to the child!—call the gate-keeper!—send for assistance at once,” I cried, furious with excitement; “above all, this villain here must not escape!”

“You may do what you like,” said Ricksworth; “hang me, burn me, stone me to death here, if you will. Only help the girl now—oh! Mercy, dear, don’t you know me?—oh! Mercy, bear up for a little while, just to say you forgive the hellish hands that did it!”

We had removed the stone by this time, and Mercy’s head was on her father’s knees; but the eyes were closed, and no voice responded from those blood-stained lips.

Sir Richard, with the child in his arms, was hurrying across to the gates. I could

hear the gate-keeper shouting already to some one across the fields.

“Do you think she’s dead?” Ricksworth asked, in a husky whisper; “for God’s sake, say you don’t think that, sir!”

“I think you have killed her, madman—that death, at least, must follow this.”

“Run for help!”

He was trembling like a child; his face was whiter than his daughter’s, and its contrast with the tangled black hair, and the restless, fiery, black eyes, was an awful sight to witness. I had no fear that he would attempt to escape—that he would think of escaping, and I ran at my utmost speed towards the gates.

“Take some water down there,” I cried to the old gate-keeper, “and bathe Mercy Ricksworth’s temples. I am going to the village.”

Three men came running in at the same time, and I motioned them towards the ruins, gasping forth,

"Ricksworth must not escape! See to it!"

I had no faith in any one's speed save my own, and I set off down the road to Welsdon. One of the men began shouting after me, and I paused and let him run towards me, stamping with impatience till he reached me.

"Are you going for a doctor, sir?"

"Ye—yes—what is it?"

"Sir Richard has already sent for Doctor Ellis in the village—John has gone on horseback. He and his assistant will be on their way back before you reach them, sir."

I could see Sir Richard, still clasping the child to his breast, passing through the oak fence into the park; there was another servant with him, who kept glancing from the child to Sir Richard's face, and talking eagerly. The child was in good hands; assistance had been sent for, and would speedily arrive—my duty was to return and afford all the assistance in my power, till

better help arrived. And what an age it seemed in coming, with the figure so still, and the group of watchers standing there, and the haggard, awful face of Peter Ricksworth looking into his child's, and taking a shade more of horror in its expression, with every moment that passed on and brought no help, and gave no hopeful words. The men standing by him offered their suggestions once or twice, but he glanced furtively at them from beneath his shaggy eyebrows, and growled at them in reply. He was stricken down like his child, and almost as helpless—once he gave vent to such a short, unearthly laugh, followed by a choking cry, that the men went back a step, and looked from one to the other with a scared expression.

The news began to spread, after the rule of evil news in general, and more strange faces to appear about the ruins. Relief was an age in coming, but it came at last—the carriage of Doctor Ellis stopped before

the ruins, and his assistant leaped out at the same time as two of the police from the Welsdon station—the whole force located in that quiet village—entered with a mob of boys and girls and village idlers.

“Where is Dr. Ellis?”

“Gone to the Hall,” said the assistant; a middle-aged man, who bore some reputation for skill in Welsdon—“where is the girl? Some of you men make a litter as quickly as possible—there’s good fellows. Cut away at the Park trees, or anything in your way.”

He was looking intently into the white face of Ricksworth’s daughter; I could see his own face shadow very much as he surveyed her. There was no hope for her upon it.

Ricksworth, who had been watching him as intently as myself, gasped forth—

“She’s not dead—she’ll get better?”

“I can’t say yet—is the litter ready? Here you men!”

"But you must say—you shall say! I'm her father, man, and can't wait while you keep the truth back. Say there's a chance of life!—oh! if you'll only say that, sir, I doan't care!"

"When we get to the Hall——"

"You're a damned two-faced scoundrel. There's death in your face!" yelled Ricksworth.

"You are doing that girl more harm than good by shaking her head."

Ricksworth became motionless as a statue, till a white-gloved hand rested on his shoulder.

"Peter Ricksworth, you're my prisoner."

"What for?"

"Attempted murder."

"You woan't take me away now?—oh! my God, doan't say you'll take me away, now!"

"It's a long way to the county gaol. The lock-up never did for Peter Ricksworth," remarked the man.

"This is my child — do you know that?"

"Yes."

"And I'm to leave her like this?"

"I don't see any help for it myself."

"There'll be a hard fight for it then, and murder done," he said.

"What! aren't you satisfied with murdering your own child?" cried the official, roughly.

The accusation struck home, and the man groaned heavily, and called down God's curses on his head, and prayed to be struck dead kneeling by his daughter's side. In the midst of much vehemence, he mingled much of blasphemous adjuration, and paled the faces of his listeners. When the litter was brought, a stormy scene ensued, for Ricksworth would help to place his daughter there; and the law was stern, and in a hurry to be gone with its prisoner.

"Let him," said the assistant, sharply—
"it's the last time."

"Ha!" yelled Ricksworth, "she'll die, then—you know she'll die!"

"It is impossible to save her."

The assistant had gathered the truth of the story from the scraps of information floating round him, and was not half so particular concerning the feelings of his principal auditor. And the awful change that came over Ricksworth told of a retributive justice, and an agony of remorse impossible for man to estimate. He flung himself upon the ground beside the litter, and cried, and moaned, and raved; he struggled with his captors to release himself, and when the litter was raised and borne across the open green space, where the ancient font stood, it required the assistance of Sir Richard's servants and game-keepers to retain him prisoner.

"This'll be tough work to get him to Tramlingford," said the policeman, panting; "are the handcuffs ready, Joe?"

"All right."

"Let me go—woan't you just let me say good-bye to her?" he groaned; "don't you hear I'm never to see her agin, and she's the only one who ever cared for me more than a dog. I must see her!"

"Will you promise to come quietly, then?"

"Yes—so help my God!"

The litter was stopped, and the guilty man raised his handcuffed hands, and prayed again to be struck dead at her side; in his excitement he would have flung himself upon her, if those who were watchful of him had not closed upon him.

He forgot his promise to his captors—as he had forgotten through life all his promises to be honest, sober, a good father and husband—and was torn away struggling for liberty, and uttering the old curses on himself, and on those who kept him from his daughter's side.

His awful cries were ringing in my ears when he was miles on his road to Tramlings-

ford. All the day I heard them like a horrible refrain to the tragedy that had occurred ; in the night I sat up in bed wherein I had fought hard for sleep and failed, and fancied that it could not be delusion which brought them so plainly to my startled senses. Outside in the dark passages beyond, they *must* be ringing still !

But before that time the worst was known —the worst, or the best.

CHAPTER VII.

MERCY.

WE found Sir Richard on the steps of the Hall, awaiting our arrival.

"Is she dead?" were his first words to me.

"Not yet—the assistant gives no hope."

"I have sent a messenger to telegraph to Agatha and her husband, and to a London physician, in whom I have great confidence."

"The boy—he is not killed, I hope?" I asked.

The tears sprung to the eyes of the ba-

ronet, and it was a struggle with his voice to answer me at all.

“Doctor Ellis speaks like his assistant.”

“No hope?”

“He says so. But I won’t think so—I can’t believe so!” cried the baronet; “only one stone grazed him in the descent. Only one, Mr. Neider, and poor Mercy was buried underneath. What could have been the intention of all this?—was it my life that was aimed at by that villain?”

I did not answer. For the present the grim truths around us were sufficient, and there was much to do.

“I must go to the railway station,” I said.

“Don’t leave me, Mr. Neider,” implored the baronet; “you will not leave the Hall yet awhile, whilst all this uncertainty hovers near us. Your stay here is almost imperative, and it would be a great favour—a great kindness.”

“I am going to telegraph to Mr. Thirsk

—he is not with his wife. A temporary separation ensued on his learning the news that——”

“Yes—yes—I know,” he interrupted ;
“spare me now ! Every word is an accusation—I have acted very wrongly, God forgive me ! Will you write the messages you wish to send by telegraph, and some one shall ride over with them at once. There is—there is Mercy’s mother too.”

“I have not forgotten her. I am trying to remember the name of the street.”

But in the disturbed condition of my mind I could not think of it, and in my message to Thirsk I told the whole news, and begged him to apprise the mother, and send money for her passage down to Weldon. I telegraphed also to Harriet Genny—she had been Mercy’s friend, and longed so much for Mercy’s friendship once. Then there was nothing left but to sit down with the baronet in the great room, where

the untasted breakfast was spread out, and wait as patiently as possible for news. There was a maid-servant acting as nurse to each of the sufferers, and all admittance had been denied, for a time, to any one, save the doctors, so we sat about the room, or paced its limits silently. We were both too full of thought and suspense, to talk much of all that had happened that memorable day. It seemed hours ago since the catastrophe already, and yet scarce three quarters of an hour had passed since the baronet and I shook hands in the castle ruins.

Sir Richard was feverishly impatient, and nervously alive to the footsteps of the menials passing without in the broad corridors. He went to the door and asked the servants if there were any fresh news; or if they had heard of any since he had come down stairs; if Doctor Ellis were still there; if the servants had started with my messages, and a hundred questions unnecessary and

useless. Then he would come back, and wander about the room again.

"Mr. Neider," he said, suddenly, "you started early from London. I am strangely forgetful of my duties as host. You have not breakfasted?"

"I can touch nothing yet, Sir Richard."

He did not press me, but began his old perambulations. After a quarter of an hour's silence, he said,

"Agatha should be here by twelve, or one o'clock, at latest. I told her to spare no expense, and to hire a special train, if necessary. Great heavens!" cried he, changing to the colour of the breakfast cloth, "if the boy should die before she reaches here!"

The thought was too much for him to bear in that room. He rushed away to seek Doctor Ellis, in defiance of the recent prohibition. Presently the doctor and the baronet entered the room together.

"We can do nothing till the child is con-

scious," said the doctor ; "the stupor is a bad sign, and he may pass away in it. The child is young, and has no strength. The blow has been a heavy one."

I made inquiry concerning Mercy Ricksworth—in the concern for him whom Sir Richard Freemantle considered his heir, and took such intense interest in as his sister's child, the poor girl, who had been struck down with him, seemed likely to be forgotten.

"Of course there is no hope for her," the doctor said, in rather a matter-of-fact, business-sort of way ; "she is sinking fast."

"Sinking!" I cried ; "how long has she to live, then ? "

"An hour, at the utmost."

"Is she conscious ? "

"We have just brought her round—she is anxious to know how it all happened, but I think she may be spared that."

"Thank you, sir—that is a merciful consideration," I said.

"Do you know her?—you—you are not a friend of hers?" the doctor asked eagerly.

"I know her well—I am her friend," I ventured to say.

"She's been asking to see her friends," said the doctor; "regretting that they were all away from her at such a time. I have just come with a message to Sir Richard—she wishes to see you very much."

As Sir Richard was leaving the room, I said,

"Will you tell her I am here. She will remember me, I think."

Sir Richard seemed hardly to have departed, before he returned to the room.

"She will see you instead in a few moments; when she has rallied a little she will send for you. This is all very awful!" he muttered, sinking into a chair, and rocking himself slowly to and fro, as though in pain.

I stood by the bay-window, looking into the spacious garden that stretched beyond

and waited for my summons. There was a gilt time-piece on the mantel-shelf, and it chimed the quarter, and half-hour, without a message from the dying girl. I was thinking of renewing my inquiries concerning her, when Doctor Ellis's assistant opened the door, looked round, and beckoned to me. I followed him, and went along the spacious corridors, the stone floor spread with strips of deer-skin, to a room at the extremity of the building, that had been hastily turned into a bed-room, to prevent carrying the poor girl upstairs. Formerly it had been a small study, or store-room for the antiquities that Sir Richard Freemantle had collected, and the glass-cases that faced me were full of fossils and strata of earth—significant of that hard study of past ages, which had turned his thoughts and heart too much from the life around him, and his duties in it.

The impromptu nurse moved away from the bedside as I advanced towards it,

and the assistant felt her pulse again as she turned her dark eyes in my direction, and smiled faintly and wearily at me.

"I thought I was quite alone, Mr. Neider," she said in a low voice, and speaking with great difficulty; "God sends me one I can—trust, I think."

"You may rely upon my assistance, Mercy," I responded; "on my friendship. This is a very hard and sudden fate to come upon us all."

"Do you think that I am afraid to die?" she said calmly.

"I hope not—I think not."

"I have thought—of death—more than once, as the best that could befall me in a world where I have been a little—just a little—misunderstood. I don't—complain!"

She struggled a little with her breath, and put a handkerchief to her lips a moment. The assistant watched her anxiously.

"You need not be afraid, sir," she said to him.

"You will not excite yourself?"

"Does it matter much?" she asked.

After a moment's pause she motioned me to take the seat by her bedside, and *looked* the assistant to a distance—out of hearing, in the shadow of the room where the nurse sat glancing at us both. Then she lay struggling with her breath again, and with her life, the sands of which ran on so swiftly to the end!

"Accidents such as these," she whispered, "must fall here and there. Better on me than others. The boy will die, they tell me."

"I hope not—I am not sure."

"God bless him!" she murmured, and was silent again.

They were long, anxious pauses, which deprived me of my breath, and brought each time the doctor to the bedside to watch, feel her pulse, and then steal back again. The silence between each whispering grew longer every instant, and presaged the eternal stillness coming on.

"I should have liked mother here—poor father—Harriet—Agatha. Dear Agatha!" she added, "if my dying, even her boy's, could make—her life—more happy now!"

"God may will it so, Mercy."

"You are a good young man—thank you for that hope."

A long pause, and then her voice more weak and afar off.

"Strange to have you here at the last, and—only you! Mr. Neider," in a more excited whisper, "you will remember me to the one—true—friend *you* have."

"William Grey?"

The quivering of her eyelids betokened that I comprehended her.

"Tell him—tell him," she said, after another long silence, "that I—I *have loved him through it all!*—I wish him to know that, for my own sake, lest he should think I never knew—the worth of his true heart. But I loved him too well—too well," she repeated, "to let him marry me, *and*

mine. Mr. Neider, you will not forget—
this? ”

“Never!”

“You are crying!” she exclaimed, in wonderment.

“Pardon me—but I have misunderstood you too. I see all now—your generosity—your nobleness!”

“My common prudence,” she whispered, and then closed her eyes once more.

It was so long before she recovered, that I glanced towards the assistant to learn if there were any hopes that she would speak again. For a time he seemed in doubt, but she rallied suddenly, and turned at once to the place where she had seen me last.

“It has been an up-hill life,” she said; “God mercifully—shortens it! Tell Mr. Thirsk I forgive him for—his thoughts of me—make him and Agatha better friends, sir, if you can.”

“I will do my best.”

"Tell mother—I am sorry she was not here to say good-bye to me. Tell father—that I—hoped—he would think of me, and try to—try to—live a better—life, for the sake of—her he loved a little! And oh! sir, if, when I am gone, you could find a place—for mother in your farm, if he *should*—keep on going wrong, in spite of me."

"I will not forget her, Mercy."

"And—and Harriet—I am sorry she is not here. Her life has been—not unlike my own. If you would try to——"

"To what?" I asked, eagerly.

There was a hard struggle not to subside into the old deathlike stupor. It was the sudden rallying at the last, and the earnest nature seemed to conquer, even then, her weakness.

"To make her happy—she who has thought—of you so long!"

"No—no!"

"I have seen it—read it all—it is the

truth, sir. Bid her good-bye for me, and do your best for all—of us! *Think of—*”

Another long pause—the doctor, stealing to her side, even the nurse coming with him, all hushed attention and subdued alarm.

“Will she speak again?” I asked.

Looking at her so calm and still then, with the grey light on her face, which had changed so suddenly, I could but doubt it, though I waited for the answer of one more skilled than I.

“Never in this world, sir—she’s dead!”

CHAPTER VIII.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

LATER in the day the house was full of guests. The messages from Welsdon had flashed along the wires to trouble many hearts—and Agatha, and Harriet, Mercy's mother, William Grey, Sir Richard's physician, and Thirsk, were all beneath the roof-tree of Sir Richard Freemantle. A strange assembly of guests, that only some strange incident or accident—such as had happened here—could have brought together at one time.

Concerning William Grey, I need say but little; but that I took him aside

in the early afternoon, and told the story of poor Mercy's death, and her long love for him. That he was moved and childlike in his sorrow, the reader may imagine—his was a child's heart, not difficult to move at any time.

He went into the room, took his silent leave, and his last look at her, and went away without a word. I believe he was a better Christian, a less worldly man from that day.

I was the first to meet Nicholas Thirsk, who was the last to arrive at the Hall. I had been on the watch for him an hour at the lodge-gates when he came along the country road. He was advancing swiftly, with his face bent downwards, and with the oldsternness that nothing would soften on his features. Until he was close upon me, he did not know I had been watching for him.

"How's the boy?" was his first inquiry.

"About the same—no better or no worse."

"Conscious?"

"No."

I saw his hands clench suddenly, and then relax again.

"And my wife—has she come?"

"She has been here some hours."

"Now, the story?"

Proceeding up the carriage drive, towards the Hall, I told the story to him; and he listened patiently, and betrayed only his suppressed excitement by the closing and opening of his hands. When I had concluded, his foot was on the broad steps that led up to the door.

"Here at last!" he said.

I fancied the old mocking fire was in his eyes again, as he turned to me; that, amidst the trouble that had fallen on him, his own fancied wrongs were still uppermost and unatoned for. He roused my scorn and hatred of his imaginary inquiries, and I cried—

"If you come here in the mood I left

you yesternight, go back ! If you have no sorrow for all the evil you have caused, and are but here to add to it, you had better turn away ! No one will miss you, no one here will care for your extravagance in the real affliction there is to mourn for in this house."

He stood with his foot on the lower step, still watching me ; my outburst did not affect him as it might have done in the days we both had left behind. Astonishment, rage, even the old sneer at my indignation, were absent at that time. He looked almost sorrowfully at me.

"Neider," he said, "don't think me quite such a devil. I am troubled, ill at ease, and there is much that sits heavily on my conscience. The knowledge that I am the murderer of my boy is enough to weigh me down at present—don't you think so ?"

"Forgive me—I thought you came in an ill spirit."

"No," he answered ; "and now give me

the letter that I wrote to Sir Richard. It is with you still?"

"Yes."

He went slowly and thoughtfully into the house, tearing the letter to pieces as he walked. Outside the drawing-room door Sir Richard Freemantle met him. The two men, who had been so long apart—who had both, perhaps, so long misunderstood each other—were face to face. It was a painful meeting for them both.

"I am glad you have come," murmured the baronet; "your wife is upstairs."

"Shall I go up now?" he answered

"I had better prepare her—she is very weak, but—but she will not leave the boy."

"Who is this?" asked Thirsk, as a short, spare man came down the stairs.

"My own physician—Dr. Barford."

"Has the child a chance of life, sir?" asked Thirsk.

"My dear sir, it is impossible to say at present. Whilst there is life, there is hope."

"Ah! I know what that means."

And Thirsk turned away. The baronet caught the physician by the arm.

"A thousand pounds when he is out of danger, doctor."

"Oh! my dear sir, I shan't want bribing in the good cause."

Thirsk looked at me; it was a strange remark of Sir Richard's, and it was so vivid a contrast to the offer for as large a sum made yesternight, that he shrunk back in dismay.

"Have you told him?" he said, when we were together in the desert of a drawing-room.

"No—it was a folly of yours—a madness, and meant nothing."

"See what it has brought on me!" cried Thirsk; "ha!—who's this?"

The door had opened, and Agatha Thirsk had entered; but she had changed so much with her new troubles added to the old, that he could scarce believe it was his wife before him.

Very white, but very calm, she came with a steady step towards him, and looked him in the face.

“ I take all the blame, Nicholas, but you will spare me now? It is God’s judgment on my duplicity, but I cannot bear more than to know that I am justly punished.”

“ Don’t you know that it is all my fault?” he said.

“ How can it be yours? Oh! Nicholas, you will be calm, for our dear baby’s sake—you will remember that my trial is so much greater than your own, and that I am praying still for strength? ”

“ Can I see the boy?” he asked, hoarsely.

“ The doctor says ‘ Yes.’ ”

They went out together, that strange, ill-matched couple, and left me in the drawing-room, thinking of all that might follow this night, and how one little life, or death, might influence all their after-days. Sir Richard Freemantle did not return—the physician kept to his own room or

the patient's—of Harriet Genny I saw nothing—only Mrs. Ricksworth's face suddenly peered round the door, and froze me with its ghastliness.

“Oh! I beg pardon—I thought Sir Richard was here.”

“No—he is not here.”

“Will you tell him John Simmons is going to drive me over to the Tramlingsford Gaol. I couldn't live the night out without seeing or hearing of the old man, now he's in such dreadful trouble. Oh! it's awful trouble, sir, to come upon him at last!”

And the woman burst into tears, and struggled towards the first chair near the door, where she sat and rocked herself, and wrung her hands.

“I did my best for her and him, and all's gone contrary. Though I say it that shouldn't, he was—no, I won't say it at all now.”

And this eccentric old woman sprung up, and darted out of the room. A few minutes afterwards I heard the wheels of some vehicle receding along the carriage drive. Presently Thirsk re-entered, pale and ghostly, like all the figures that flitted about the house that night.

"Neider," said he, dropping into the chair beside me, "if the boy die, I shall end it all with a pistol-shot!"

"Is that a fair resolve, Thirsk?"

"It's my only one."

"You would cure one trouble by a greater. Do you think your wife is of iron, that you would cast so awful a grief upon her in her bitterest hour?"

"She will be happier without me."

"If he die there is but one comfort left her. The power will rest with you to make amends for the great loss—it is in your own hands, Thirsk, to comfort her."

"It *was*! I have thrown my power all away—I have lost it all by my accursed

folly, and between man and wife is utter isolation. She will not grieve or sorrow for me, or any act of mine, now—I can read it in every icy word that passes her lips.”

“She is in trouble. Patience.”

He crossed his arms upon his chest and looked down at his feet. He remained so long motionless that I thought he had fallen asleep, and touched him gently. He started, shook himself, made an effort to say a few words, and then went back to his own gloomy reverie, wherein no hope seemed lying beyond to lighten him. Watching him furtively, I wondered what was best for him in this turning-point of his career—for the boy to live and bring him back to better thoughts, or for the loss to draw him nearer to his wife, and from their common trouble evolve the new existence and the truer man?

Later that night Mrs. Ricksworth returned, and went direct to her room. She

passed me on the stairs, a firm, old woman in the midst of all her trouble. She had been crying on her way home, but her eyes were tearless then.

“Good night, sir.”

“Did you see your husband, Mrs. Ricksworth?”

“No; they wouldn’t let me, the hard-hearted wretches. He had heard the dreadful news before I reached there, though, and it’s driven him clean, raving mad, as well it might—as well it might!”

She went upstairs, muttering these words over and over to herself, and I saw no more of her that night. I made inquiry for Harriet Genny after that, and learned she had gone back again, after the solemn visit to her dead cousin.

The impression began to deepen on me, that I should be better away from this hotse of mourning—that I had no right to stay there; but upon seeking Sir Richard and making known that wish, he begged me

so earnestly not to leave the Hall yet, that I reluctantly consented to remain for a few days his guest.

“But can I do good here?” I said.

“Who can tell what good may follow your mediation, now my brother-in-law is in this house?”

He did not know that my mediation would not be required.

Very late that night there came the good news to the drawing-room that the child was conscious, and Thirsk started to his feet with a wild cry of exultation. To his life's end he would be ever excitable, and easily changed.

“If he live—if he be only spared, I will never forget the lesson that this day has taught me!” he cried.

“Hush!—hush!—make no bargain with your Maker, Thirsk.”

“Neider, I am always wrong,” he cried.

Hope was dashed the next day by the news that fever had set in, and that an

hour or two might end all dreams of such happiness as Thirsk had built on. Thirsk's excitement took a new turn; it carried him, in defiance of all medical authority, into the sick child's chamber, where he watched and nursed, and where the child clung to him as to the one friend he had missed in the affliction of his little life. And Thirsk changed from that hour; he assumed a calmer, graver attitude; became the tender, careful, watchful father, whose soul was in his son's recovery, but whose will was gathering strength to meet the blow, if it should be God's will to take the flower from him. Troubles such as these, I believe, change many men; turn them from the wilfulness and wickedness of their hearts to thoughts of others—to hope, and prayer and faith. Troubles that he had made greater by his own rashness, troubles that particularly affected him, Thirsk had always succumbed to, whilst apparently defying; but this suffering of his little

child's awakened in him a concern for others' griefs, and touched the chord—the true chord—that was rusting in a nature still reclaimable. A common trouble with his wife, which both could share and pray for, and which brought both together with thoughts and hopes in common, was salvation to him, and from the evil followed good and better things.

On the third day there came the good news for which all in that house were anxiously praying — the change for the better in the child.

Dr. Barford came into the room with a beaming face, which his skill might have helped to produce, but which a fee of a thousand pounds—a fee that don't fall in everybody's way—certainly helped to promote. Sir Richard Freemantle and I were in the drawing-room. Nicholas Thirsk entered immediately after the physician.

“Out of danger, Sir Richard—out of danger!”

"Thank God!"

The baronet started up, and shook the physician's hands heartily in his.

"I knew you would be pleased to pay that heavy fee you threatened me with," he said, laughing.

How he did laugh! So pleasantly and heartily, but with such a twinkling light in the eyes that met Sir Richard.

"And you shall have the fee, sir. I am always as good as my word."

"My de—ear sir!" cried the physician, mildly deprecatory.

But he rubbed one white hand over the other, and looked excessively delighted when Sir Richard produced his cheque-book.

"Out of danger!" said Thirsk, an hour later; "this is a memorable night for me to look back upon, in the better future I have thought of."

"And resolved on," I added.

"Ever the right word, Neider."

He crossed the room, and held out his hand to the baronet.

"The first step that should have been made long since, Sir Richard," said he; "is it a hand worth taking, after all that has passed?"

"I hope so. My dear Nicholas, does Agatha know of this?"

"Not yet."

"Shall we go up together?"

"If you will—but here is one friend who must stand witness to my new faith. He has tried so long, and arduously, and ineffectually to make me something like himself."

"But the boy——"

"Is asleep, and out of danger."

We went cautiously together into the boy's room. The young Thirsk was sleeping calmly—the mother, with her hands clasped together, in prayerful attitude, sat and watched her boy.

The danger was past for him—the old life,

full of danger to her, she was beginning to recoil from.

Our entrance alarmed her. She looked from one to the other, and seemed to dread some new disaster by our appearance there.

“Agatha, our old friend Neider has come to see the boy.”

“He is sleeping. You will not touch him, sir.”

“I would not disturb him for the world.”

“He has come to stand witness to our contract, wife.”

“What is that?”

And she glanced timidly into her husband's face.

“To love and honour each other, until death, that has fled from our boy, shall part us for ever. To witness the dawn of the new life beginning for us both.”

“Nicholas! — in earnest!” she exclaimed.

“God stand a witness, too, to that!”

She was in his arms and sobbing on his breast. The arms that held her to him trembled very much.

“Shall I tell you what Mercy Ricks-worth’s dying words were?” I said.

It seemed a strange question at that moment; but Thirsk nodded.

“‘If my dying—even her boy’s—could make her life more happy!’ And the boy is spared,” I added.

They were silent—reverent. On the threshold of the new life awaiting them they remembered the sleeper in that house, the faithful friend and servant, with whom the cares and troubles, joys and sorrows, of all life on earth were over.

CHAPTER IX.

“FINIS.”

WERE they all the words of Mercy Ricksworth that I had treasured, or were there other words of value that woke up a vague hope in me once again? When Mercy Ricksworth's grave was green, I thought of them; when the shadow of the Welsdon tragedy was less heavy on me, I let them trouble me.

It was winter then, and Grey and I were partners still. The world had changed with those whose lives had been strangely linked with mine; the Freemantle estate had been sold, and Sir Richard was living in

London, with his sister, his sister's husband, and the child he called his heir. The new life had begun, and Thirsk's steps were not faltering; every step that led him on the brighter way indicated strength and resolution; the private secretaryship scheme had been discovered, or rather avowed, and Sir Richard and the brother-in-law worked no longer in the dark for and against each other. For Thirsk was working upwards in the sunlight! Mrs. Ricksworth was in my service—a fair and careful servant, and if a little crotchety and inclined to argue with her younger subordinates, still one who knew her place, and was strangely reverential to my mother, me, and William Grey. Her husband was hopelessly mad in a lunatic asylum, and Ipps had died three months ago.

Harriet Genny and her uncle were still the tenants of the little cottage on the farm estate; and Harriet was still repellent, as though a cruel past lay a barrier between

us, that no labour of my own would ever surmount. But I had a new hope, born of Mercy's dying words—and it was cherished and held to my heart, despite the distance, vague and impenetrable. It made the life different around me—it brought back all that past, no longer cruel to me—the dear old days of Follingay, that hid a secret known, as she fancied, but to herself and God. If it were a secret in which I had been concerned—if it were only possible to be that secret—in the mists around me might be waiting much of happiness! But she had married since the days at Follingay, and in her wifely duties set me for ever aside—it was just and right, and I had no claim upon her. Still she was not happy; she had known no happiness in her wedded life, and beyond it. Free from the slavery of the ring—no more galling, cruel sign of bondage, when hearts have played no part in the contract, or played too wildly, and resolved themselves to ashes—she wore still

the same look of discontent, of even inward fretfulness. And she was but two years my senior; life was a long journey alone, and she had known nothing of true happiness. All the mistakes, privations, trials of an uphill life had been hers, and it was in my power—I believed it was in my power to chase them all away.

In the winter time I took counsel of Farmer Genny—told him the story of how long and patiently I had loved his niece, and laid bare the truth before him. He heard me to the end, wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and gave vent to the most dolorous “ay” that had ever escaped him.

“Don’t you give me hope, Genny?”

“Ye maun seek it for yourself. I doan’t know what’s in her heart—I can only see there’s trouble in it, which keeps her lonely enough, poor lass! But, Mr. Neider—I ha’ nothing to say again’ the match—I’ll—darmed if I woan’t jump for joy to see it,

though it's taking her away from me!"

He did not jump for joy just then.

It was a hard fight to break through the wall of ice with which she was encompassed ; but I made the venture when her widowhood was twelve months old. Speaking of Mercy one night by the winter's fire, when Genny suddenly left us together, without much apparent motive for so doing, I told her of Mercy's last wish respecting both of us. Earnestly, rapidly, with a heart that plunged as in the old times under circumstances which were akin to this, I told the story, keeping back Mercy's suspicion of a truth that I could not, dared not expect her to confess. She was moved, and the tears fell like diamonds in the firelight ; but she would not listen when I pleaded for myself—told her of the love I had, and the better, purer love I sought.

" Mr. Neider, I shall never marry again, to make a man's home unhappy, and to be shadowed myself by his want of sympathy

in me and my pursuits. I am fitted for a single life, and I have promised myself that solitary solace."

"Another promise!" I cried, indignantly; "you who know the folly of such promises, made in the heat of passion, when the mind is troubled, and one cannot fairly estimate the right and wrong—you, Harriet!"

She coloured, but she stood on her defence still.

"What do you know of my promises?" she said, with her dear old petulance predominant.

"I do not know—I do not seek to know. It is of the present promise I am speaking now, and I would break it down. In shadowing your own life, have you a right to cast a blight on mine—have you the heart, Harriet, after all my years of love?"

"You are a boy still—this is the boy's romance, and I will hear no more of it!"

"If I would try to make her happy, she who has thought of you so long!" They were

Mercy's words, that kept me strong, and I persisted. By the firelight I could see her changing, and the tears still falling. What if her words were hard and seemed unyielding, when that red lip quivered and that bosom heaved so wildly, and her eyes would shun my own? I was fighting for the past—the dear past again—and her impatience—her strange petulance, her little quick replies, were all fragments thereof wafting slowly back once more.

I knew it when she sobbed more violently, and her hand was in my own and shrank not.

And yet at the last she broke away, and stood trembling but defiant.

“You may go now, sir—I will hear no more!”

“And am I to go without a hope, Harriet?”

“I am a young widow still,” she said, almost fiercely; “a year hence I shall be growing an old woman!”

“ Give me that year to hope in ! ”

“ You are a dreamer—you will ever be a child, without the courage or the patience to wait.”

But I waited !

THE END

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